

आधुनिक भारत के निर्माता

BUILDERS OF MODERN INDIA

HAREKRUSHNA
MAHTAB

Prof. M.N. Das

Dr. C.P. Nanda

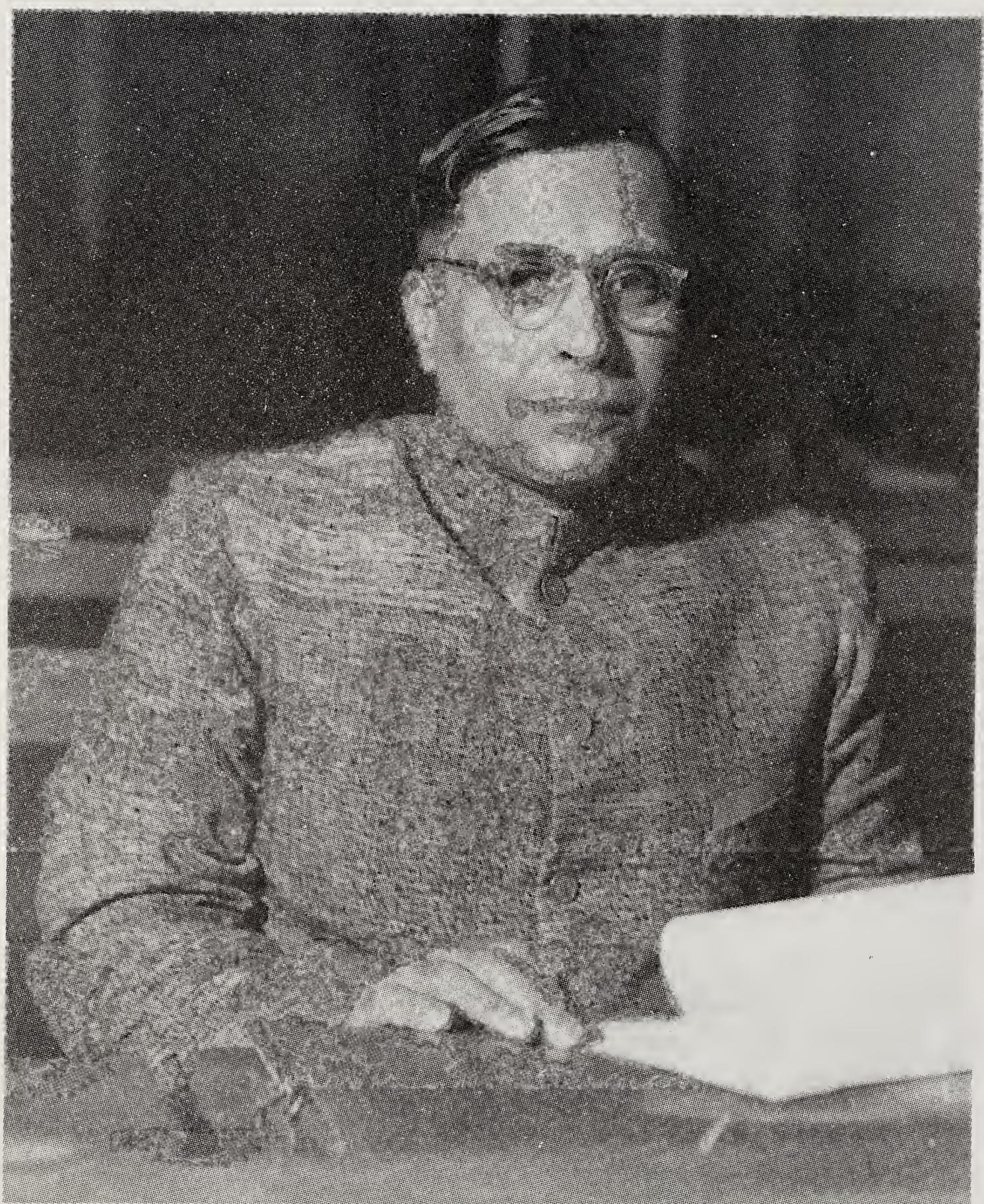
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**HAREKRUSHNA
MAHTAB**

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ABOUT THE SERIES

The object of this series is to record, for the present and future generations, the story of the struggles and achievements of the eminent sons and daughters of India who have been mainly instrumental in our national renaissance and the attainment of independence.

The biographies are planned as handy volumes written by knowledgeable persons and give a brief account, in simple words, of the life and activities of the eminent leaders and of their times. They are not intended either to be comprehensive studies or to replace the more elaborate biographies.

The work of writing these lives has to be entrusted to different persons. It has, therefore, not been possible to publish the biographies in a chronological order. It is hoped, however, that within a short period all eminent national personalities will figure in this series.

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PREFACE

Harekrushna Mahtab of Orissa rose into eminence in the wake of the national upsurge of the Gandhian era, beginning from 1919-20. Born in the last year of the 19th Century in a family of landlords, he gave up college education to join the freedom movement and waded through the ordeals of the Non-co-operation Movement of 1921, the Civil-Disobedience Movement of 1930-31 and the Quit India Movement of 1942, undergoing several terms of imprisonment and suffering enough privation and hardship.

During the first two decades of his political career, he earned distinction as a relentless leader of the peasants in their unrest against the oppressive landlords, and during the decade before independence, he distinguished himself as an outspoken critic of the princely order in India.

Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel and Harekrushna Mahtab ultimately became the chief architects of the merger of the Princely States with the Indian Union.

Like some rare stalwarts among the freedom fighters of his generation, Mahtab took to journalism to create public awareness in matters of political, social and economic issues which the country faced. By virtue of his typical personal talent he could carry his intended messages to the wider public, a talent which he amply demonstrated after independence through the editorials and columns of his daily newspaper the *Prajatantra* which marked a new approach in journalism to evoke popular response at the grassroots level towards the national, regional and local problems. As a literary

figure, Mahtab earned reputation from early years of his public life. Apart from devoting pen to patriotic literature, he delved into serious historical researches which finally resulted in the form of a monumental *History of Orissa*.

Liked by Mahatma Gandhi, admired by Subhas Chandra Bose who made him a member of Congress Working Committee, and a co-prisoner with Jawaharlal Nehru, Vallabhbhai Patel, Abul Kalam Azad and others in the Ahmednagar fort prison after the Quit India Resolution, Mahtab, on the eve of India's independence was one of the top figures in the national arena. The last two British Viceroys, Lord Wavell and Lord Mountbatten, were full of regards for him, so much so that Wavell wanted to include him in the Interim Government of 1946.

With the independence of India, Mahtab was called upon to shoulder the responsibility of governing his home State of Orissa while playing a prominent role in national politics. During his first term as Chief Minister, he shifted the capital of Orissa from the millennium-old city of Cuttack to the quiet vicinity of the most ancient temple city of Bhubaneswar wherein was built a planned modern city, symbolising the emergence of new Orissa. The construction of the multipurpose Hirakud Dam and the Rourkela Steel Plant were among his other notable achievements.

In 1950, Mahtab joined the Nehru Cabinet as the Minister for Industry and Supply. During his tenure of office at the Centre, he established several public undertakings and industries like the Sindhri Fertilisers, Pimpri Pencils, Bangalore Machine Tools, and the Hindustan Aeronautics. He also allowed private sectors to rise up for industrial development.

At the request of Shri Morarji Desai, the Chief Minister of Bombay, Nehru appointed Mahtab as the Governor of that State in March, 1955. Playing the role of an astute diplomat, he tackled the complicated linguistic and economic disputes among the people of Gujarat, Maharashtra and Karnataka regions of that undivided State. His achievements in that direction were highly appreciated

by the then President of India, Rajendra Prasad and the Prime-Minister Jawaharlal Nehru.

Much before his completion of five year term as Governor of Bombay, Mahtab had to return to Orissa as its Chief Minister in 1956 and occupied that position till 1960. In building up modern Orissa, his second-term of office was as significant as his first term. The vicissitudes in Orissa's political scenario in the following years caused much worry to the veteran leader who at last felt compelled to work out timely adjustments by forming a new political party named the Jana Congress which, in alliance with the Swatantra Party, came to power in 1967.

Mahtab retired from electoral politics in 1977, though not from active politics for nearly a decade thereafter. Continuing as a researcher and a literary person, he made substantial contribution to the history and literature till the last moment of his life. His last book titled "While Serving My Nation : Recollections of a Congress Man" was released in New Delhi on 25 Dec. 1986. Within weeks Mahtab's eventful life came to an end.

Once, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel paid his compliments to Mahtab by saying "not that Mahtab loved Orissa less but that he loved India more". Adored by the people as the 'Utkal Keshari' (the Lion of Orissa). Mahtab dominated the political, social and cultural stage of his State as a colossus for more than half a century. At the same time he was regarded and respected as one of the foremost leaders of India during the era of struggle and in post-independence India.

M.N. Das

BIRTH AND EARLY EDUCATION

Harekrushna Mahtab was born on 21 November 1899 at a place named Agarpara in Bhadrak Sub-division of Balasore District in Orissa. His father's name was Krushna Chandra Das who was the son-in-law of Jagannath Mahtab, the proprietor of the Agarpara estate. Since Jagannath Mahtab had no son, he adopted Harekrushna as his son. After being adopted as the son of Jagannath, Harekrushna assumed the surname Mahtab instead of Das. After the death of Jagannath Mahtab, Krushna Chandra Das managed the affairs of Agarpara estate till 1927.

It is known from Mahtab's own accounts that the *Zamindar* family of Agarpara came from Amritsar of the Punjab. It is believed that during Mughal emperor Akbar's military expedition to Orissa, a particular group of traders of North-West India known as 'Kshetri' accompanied the Mughal army. Those traders who used to supply food and other necessities to the marching soldiers had in due course of time developed a monopoly in that particular business. It was during that period that a group of 'Kshetri' families settled in Orissa. And some sections of a particular 'Kshetri' family ultimately emerged as *Zamindars* of Agarpara. As a mark of 'Kshetri' settlement in Agarpara, one finds a *gaddi* of the great saint Nanak, who belonged to that race. This place is popularly known as 'Bhaiji Badi' in Agarpara.

The first *Zamindar* of Agarpara had inherited the title of 'Singh'. He had six brothers and when their families expanded, some members of the family captured a part of Keonjhar State and

ruled there as Rajas. With the coming of the British rule, the *Zamindari* of Agarpara was declared as an estate. A portion of this estate was under the ownership of Ramchandra Singh who died without a heir. Jagannath Mahtab became the owner of the property as per the wish of Ramchandra Singh.

Krushna Chandra Das had established an L.P. School in Agarpara which in due course attained the status of M.E. School. Harekrushna Mahtab, in fact, received his primary education in this school. He however, used to receive English education at home. At the age of 12, he joined Bhadrak H.E. School, from where he passed his Matriculation in 1917. During his schooling at the village, Mahtab came to be heavily influenced by two teachers namely Krupasindhu Mohanty and Bhagaban Charan Mohapatra. The former taught Mahtab English and the latter was the headmaster of the school. Both these teachers were known for their enthusiasm and idealism.

In fact, the initial impulse for becoming a perfect citizen or a greatman was imbedded in Mahtab's consciousness by these two learned teachers. Moreover, as a quite young student, Mahtab showed his dexterity by composing *Ramayan* in poetic form.

During his stay at Bhadrak, Mahtab led a very simple life. His father saw to it that Mahtab concentrated only on his studies. That is why, he appointed one of the school teachers of Agarpara, Bishnu Charan Panigrahi as his guardian. The latter received all the money required for the day-to-day expenditure of Mahtab, including messing, school fees, etc. So, Mahtab hardly got a single pie to spend unnecessarily. Mahtab's father was really strict about financial matters and he remitted the monthly allowance for Mahtab according to the required calculation. Moreover, Mahtab was all the time kept under the watchful supervision of his guardian in Bhadrak. Whenever he went, the guardian accompanied him.

As Mahtab remembers, his living standard during this phase at Bhadrak was no better than a poor man's. With four pieces of cloth and two pairs of shirts and with the minimum possible menu

comprising of rice, dal and curry, Mahtab was almost made to live a life regulated by a strict routine. At times, Mahtab was getting fed up looking at the way he was leading his life in comparison to others who maintained an easy life of luxury and comfort. But as he realised later on, a student at a tender age should lead such a life which ultimately helps in the overall character-making of the person. In fact, his father's idea was that if students get extra money to spend in towns or urban areas, they would either spend the money on liquor or pleasures and thus go wayward. Eventhough, Mahtab had to lead a very simple life devoid of luxury and comfort, it ultimately helped him foster in him the ideal of simple living and high thinking.

After doing his matriculation, Mahtab was keen to go for higher education, an idea which was hardly accepted by his father, Krushna Chandra. The latter rather wanted that Mahtab should take up the responsibility of managing the Agarpara estate instead of going for higher education. His contention was that since his son was sufficiently educated in English to handle the affairs of the estate, and as he was not to take up government service, he should not go outside for higher education. Moreover, in order to dissuade Mahtab from harbouring such ideas regarding college education and a service-career, he got Mahtab married in 1917. His father was thinking that once Mahtab was married, he would settle down as a good house-holder.

During his student life at Bhadrak, Mahtab got in touch with few monks of Rama Krishna Mission, namely Swami Brahmananda and Amulya Mukherjee, who frequently came to Bhadrak to look into the affairs of Ramkrishna Bose's *Zamindary*. The latter was an ardent devotee of Ramkrishna Paramahansa. The very contact with these monks enabled Mahtab to go through the speeches and writings of Swami Vivekananda. Such influence on Mahtab instilled in him nobler ambitions of life than becoming a mere manager of Agarpara estate. It was in this context, Mahtab insisted on having higher education at Ravenshaw College, Cuttack, the premier

educational institution of Orissa. Finally, he joined Ravenshaw College in 1916 to pursue his career in Science, despite a stiff parental opposition.

II

COLLEGE EDUCATION AND THE APPEAL OF NATIONALIST POLITICS

The college career of Mahtab makes interesting reading as far as it marks the beginnings and progressive transformation of his personality towards a political future. Mahtab came to Cuttack to pursue his studies in Ravenshaw College, but did not take his studies seriously. Instead he was seen more interested in activities concerning public life. He was neither satisfied with the life styles of majority of students residing in hostels nor with the activities of student leaders of the college who lacked commitment and sincerity of purpose for social works. Very soon, however, he developed friendly relation with two other like-minded students, Naba Krushna Choudhury and Prahlad Sahu, and the trio attempted to bring about a change in the attitude of others by initiating political awareness and outlook which the student community lacked in those days. They started discussing various issues pertaining to public life and contemporary politics. The mess in which Mahtab had put up at Cuttack became a centre of student politics for discussions and debates on several important issues. Some of the progressive students bought newspapers like the *New India* of Annie Besant which others read. Inspired by the contents of such patriotic papers the inmates of the mess, under the initiative of Mahtab and Naba Choudhury, brought out a hand-written monthly journal titled *Malaya*. Side by side, Mahtab started editing an English journal *Dustbin*. Such a distinct ideological concern of the three friends, supported by some others, led them to style themselves

as 'Free thinkers'. They defined their specific strand of philosophy as living according to just and right values instead of following the path of the majority. To demonstrate this individuality, Mahtab often went to the college putting a *tilak* mark on his forehead, braving comments and joke of many fellow students.

Inspired by the views of Prof. Jogesh Chandra Bose, an eminent Botanist, that *Tasar* clothes had many positive effects on human health, Mahtab often went to the college, putting on *Matha* (*Tasar*) dress, thus inviting ridicule from his friends. But, these experiences and practices consolidated his self-confidence and helped assert his individuality as well as new line of thinking. Mahtab, during the early period of his college career, also came under the influence of one C.R.D. Naidu, a *Yogi*. The latter taught him how to increase the inner secret strength of the person by *yogic* exercises like *pranayama* with the objective of awakening the inner self.

Mahtab's preoccupation with these activities badly affected his preparation for I.Sc. Examination. However, with hard work for a fortnight at a stretch, he could manage to pass in second division. Realising seriously that studying science demanded considerable amount of study and preparation, he opted for Arts with Economics and Sanskrit as subjects at the graduation level. He proved good in both the subjects and managed to secure 50 percent of marks at minimal effort.

While doing his B.A., Mahtab became a member of the Bharat Sevak Sangha, organised by Laxmi Narayan Sahu which helped him in learning many vital lessons concerning public life. As an activist of the Sangha, he also opened up a shop dealing with paper and pencil on the basis of the provisions of co-operative society.

Mahtab was quite impressed by the determined effort of Madhusudan Das, the undisputed leader of Orissa, in unifying the Oriya-speaking tracts. Madhu Babu's two significant assertions in connection with the above issue viz. "Life blood of a people is not too dear a price to secure justice for their progeny" and 'History of

Bengal should not be lost upon us" apparently appealed to Mahtab considerably. But yet, in the prevailing atmosphere in the context of the Rowlatt Act, Rowlatt Satyagraha, the Punjab massacre, nationalist speeches of Tilak and Gandhi and the propagation of the concept of Swaraj, Mahtab, like many other youths, tended to differ from the dominant political perception of the contemporary Oriya leaders as expressed from their platforms like the Utkal Union Conference. In fact, the UUC and its top leadership put primacy on the politics of the unification of Oriya-speaking tracts. In the emerging perspective of the propagation of radical nationalist views, Mahtab could hardly reconcile to such views of UUC.

Interestingly, some of the students of Ravenshaw College like Mahtab, Naba Krushna Choudhury, Nityananda Kanungo, Jadumani Mangaraj and Bhagirathi Mohapatra, those who practically differed from the politics of UUC and its leader Madhu Babu, organised a library movement in Cuttack town around 1919 and 1920. In due course, their library, *Bharati Mandir* became an active platform for spelling out and spreading nationalist views basically among the intelligentsia in Orissa. On behalf of the *Bharati Mandir* Mahtab was deputed to attend the special Congress session in 1920 at Calcutta as an observer where he had the opportunity to listen to Chittaranjan Das, Motilal Nehru, Lajpat Rai, Madan Mohan Malaviya and Gandhi. What struck Mahtab most was Malaviya's speech wherein the latter asserted that the message of NCO should be preached in the interiors of the country. Besides, Gandhi's explanation about the non-violent non-cooperation as the best practicable political strategy to attain Swaraj, leading to exchange of excited debate and the final approval of the Gandhian strategy left a deep impression on him. Mahtab, who had gone to Calcutta with C.R.D. Naidu (his spiritual *guru*) instantly developed differences of opinion and subsequent parting of company with the latter following Naidu's opposition to the Gandhian strategy in contrast to Mahtab's support of Gandhi's views at the Calcutta Congress. Back in Cuttack, Mahtab felt as if his image had gone up in the eyes of the students as well as college professors. He discussed about the Gandhian principles adopted in Calcutta as

well as about the state of affairs prevailing in the Congress with the students of Ravenshaw College and the members of *Bharati Mandir*. The impact of the Calcutta Congress and the activists of *Bharati Mandir* was so profound that some students became mentally prepared to leave their college studies to join the NCO. However, they decided to wait till the outcome of the Nagpur session of the Congress. Mahtab was also further haunted by a dilemma as to whether he would appear in the B.A. Examination due around Feb/March 1921. It was in this context that he attended the regular session of the Congress at Nagpur in Dec. 1920, alongwith 27 other Oriya delegates including Gopabandhu Das, Niranjan Patnaik and Bhagirathi Mohapatra. There, Mahtab was deeply moved by the remarkable ability of Gandhi in winning over his adversaries instantly. There, too, Mahtab sought the advice of Gopabandhu about his appearing at the B.A. examination. Gopabandhu advised him to take the examination first and join the movement later. Returning from Nagpur, Mahtab opposed Madhu Sudan Das's appointment as a Minister in the *Bihar Orissa* Government. Especially, when the Congress had resolved to boycott the legislature, Madhu Babu opted to be a Minister, an idea which could hardly be appreciated by the spirited nationalist youth of the time. This issue was hotly debated in the platform of *Bharati Mandir*. The activists of the *Bharati Mandir* resolved to take up the issue and stood opposed to Madhu Babu's acceptance of ministership. To raise a voice of protest against a dominant leader like Madhusudan Das in those days was a no mean effort, considering the popularity of Madhu Babu as well as the social support he enjoyed. But, *Bharati Mandir* could successfully spearhead this opposition. Under the initiatives of its activists, thousands of pamphlets written both in English and Oriya were printed. It is interesting to note that, no press owner agreed to print the pamphlets which were intended against Madhu Babu. Mahtab and others, however, could manage to do the printing in a broken press secretly during the night, the name of which was not mentioned in the pamphlets. Besides, the pamphlets were

issued without the signatures of the authors. The English pamphlet was titled : "At last Mr. Das, a Government servant drawing Rs. 60,000/- from malaria of Balasore, famine of Puri and floods of Cuttack". The pamphlet also quoted a few lines of the famous poet Browning which read as : "Just for a handful of silver, he left us, just for a ribbon to stick in his coat." The Oriya pamphlet was titled "Madhu Babu at the age of Eighty is a Government servant".

The activists of *Bharati Mandir* also opposed a move by the sympathisers of Madhu Babu to organise a meeting to celebrate his appointment to ministership. In the proposed day of the meeting, these activists as well as the supporters of nationalist view took over the meeting abruptly and dominated its proceeding. The meeting which was intended to celebrate the event, ended curiously with a resolution condemning the appointment of Madhu Babu as a Minister. This meeting, marked a grand signal for the distinct beginning of a new political life towards the goal of 'Swaraj' and 'nationalism'. In fact, the activists of *Bharati Mandir* had floated the idea of a Provincial Congress Committee in that very meeting. The reports of the meeting were also sent to Gopabandhu Das who had by that time fully delved himself into national politics.

As a result of such developments, during the Chakradharpur Session of UUC it was decided that the objective of the UUC should be the attainment of Swaraj instead of merely confining it to the unification of Oriya-speaking tracts. By that time, following the decision of Nagpur Congress, Utkal Pradesh Congress Committee was formed in Orissa and Gopabandhu became its President. Mahtab acted as a member of the working committee of UPCC and was put in charge of organising Congress activities in Balasore. Consequently, he had to leave the college due to adverse reports by the authorities against him for his active participation in politics.

Back home, Mahtab was asked by his parents to drop the idea of taking to politics and to concentrate on managing his

Zamindari. During his stay at home, his younger brother fell seriously ill and Mahtab attended on him till he got fully recovered. This, to some extent, made his father happy. But, for Mahtab, this was one of the most crucial moments of his life. He was almost bogged down by a big dilemma as to what to do. He read quite a bit of Vivekananda and finally resolved that he had to devote all his time and energy for the nation. Hence, under the plea of taking B.A. Examination privately, he requested his father to allow him to leave for Cuttack. In fact he was leaving home, *Zamindari* and the settled life of a household, to join the mainstream of national politics, though continuously haunted by a sense of guilt for having cheated his family members.

Mahtab reached Cuttack at a time when the Non-co-operation Movement was picking up under the active leadership of Gopabandhu Das, Raj Krushna Bose, Gopabandhu Choudhury (who gave up his Deputy Magistrate job to join Non-co-operation), and others. The movement received a great momentum when Gandhi undertook a tour of Orissa during 1921. He visited Bhadrak, Cuttack, Puri and Berhampur. People in thousands gathered in his meetings to have his *darshan* as well as to listen to his views. Mahtab accompanied Gandhi throughout his tour of Orissa, arranged for the Mahatma's accommodation as well as his meeting in Bhadrak. Gandhi's repeated pronouncement in referring to the British Government as 'Satanic' helped generate a sense of large scale popular defiance against the colonial Government throughout Orissa.

Gandhi's tour and his teaching inspired many to take to the NCO movement. While leaving for Madras from Berhampur, the Mahatma advised the Congress workers that they should not think too many things at a time but one at a go and then translate it into concrete action. This particular piece of advice really struck Mahtab immensely. The perceptible outcome of Gandhi's visit was that it helped elevate the morale of Congressmen in Orissa. It also galvanised the low-key functioning of UPCC to

a large extent, in terms of enrolment of Congress volunteers, formation of District Congress Committees, establishment of *Swaraj Ashram* and organisation of *Khadi*, etc. Mahtab became the obvious choice to initiate Congress work in Balasore district. Alongwith Karunakar Panigrahi, Krushna Prasada Mohapatra, Bhairab Chandra Mohapatra, he reached Balasore on 5 April 1921 to organise the National Week (commencing from 6 April, 1921) and held public meetings in Balasore town. Once on the dais, Mahtab could talk profusely and enthusiastically about the exploitation of British rule and the need to attain *Swaraj* through a broad based popular struggle. He appealed to the people to subscribe to the Congress fund. The enthusiastic response to these meetings in fact inspired Mahtab and his associates to a great extent. Mahtab also realised that Gandhi's call for National Week and his message of *Swaraj* had found ready response among a large section of people in the society. Due to his encouragement, many students gave up their studies and became full-time Congress workers. Similarly, Surendar Nath Das (who was serving as a Police Sub-Inspector) resigned his Government service and took to Congress politics under Mahtab's guidance. Popularly known as Sardar, Surendar Nath Das subsequently became a very prominent Congress leader of Balasore district. Mahtab also opened a Congress Office in Balasore and named it as *Swaraj Mandir*, the major focus of which initially was to spread the spinning of *khadi*. Side by side, the Balasore District Congress Committee was established and Mahtab remained its Secretary. The Congress activities in the district were co-ordinated under his able leadership, the major forms of which were picketing before excise shop, enrolment of Congress workers, collection of subscription for Tilak Swaraj Fund, boycott of foreign clothes etc. A weekly 8-page journal *Swaraj Samachar* was also published to preach Congress doctrine in the interiors of the district. Mahtab was in charge of it. He also managed to get some money from the Congress fund to appoint agents in Balasore district for distribution of English newspapers publishd from Calcutta like the 'Servant' and the 'A.B.

'Patrika' as well as the weekly *Samaja*, published from Cuttack. The objective was to raise the number of newspaper readers in the district. As these newspapers espoused the cause of Non-co-operation, Mahtab hoped to mobilise popular opinion in favour of the Congress and the Gandhian method of struggle, while his associates got spread over in different parts of the district to carry on Congress activities. Mahtab himself stayed in Balasore and co-ordinated the activities for the entire district. The activists including the new entrants to politics were inspired by the call of Congress in 1921 to raise one crore rupees for Tilak Swaraj fund as well as to launch one crore spinning wheels programme in India. An enthusiastic and a politically radical Mahtab volunteered to announce in many meetings during this time that, in case the Congress failed to raise one crore rupees, he would sell his entire *Zamindari* for that very purpose.

In those days, lawyers, teachers and officials, apart from common people, took to drinking openly in Balasore. The Congress volunteers took up the campaign against selling of liquor vigorously. They continuously picketed the excise shops. This fact, enraged the bad characters to such an extent that they did not hesitate to spit on the volunteers and throw urine at them. Mahtab had to suffer such indignities in his campaign against liquor, but thanks to his vigorous campaigning, there was almost an end to consumption of liquor in the district. More than that, the positive impact of the picketing on the volunteers was that they learnt the hard lessons of endurance and humility.

During this earlier phase of Congress activities in the district, Mahtab could realise that the landlord class was opposed to the Congress, whereas the petty traders and middle class land owners welcomed it. Besides, the general masses, due to their fear for the police, hardly showed any enthusiasm for Congress meetings. To overcome these difficulties, door-to-door campaigning, organisation of meetings in different localities, organisation of *Kirtan* parties and singing of nationalist songs were carried on. In the

meetings, the people were exhorted about the misrule and exploitation perpetrated by the *Zamindars*. Thus, Mahtab sought to take up a campaign against the twin enemies, British colonialism and the local landlordism.

He attended the All India Congress Committee meeting in Bombay in 1921 as a member and felt inspired by the bonfire of foreign cloth organised under the leadership of Gandhi. Back in Orissa, Mahtab took special initiatives to take up the campaign against foreign cloth so much so that at least for six months, no foreign cloth could enter Balasore.

Side by side, he meticulously arranged to prevent the transportation of foreign cloth from the town to the interior areas of the district. Because of this boycott-campaign he was jailed for a fortnight which was his first experience of jail-going as a nationalist leader.

Mahtab also organised village *Panchayats* in many parts of the distirct. A *Zilla Panchayat* was also established with himself as its head. Anybody who was not satisfied with the decision of the *Gram Panchayat* could carry appeal to the *Zilla Panchayat*. The organisation and functioning of the *Panchayat* system was so effective that even the *Zamindars* were forced to submit the names of persons who had defaulted in the payment of rent. This step practically led to the boycotting of the British Courts in the district. An ardent activist named Banchanidhi Mohanty did a great job in assisting Mahtab for the organisation of *Panchayats*.

In response to the Gandhian call for conducting civil disobedience, around September 30, Mahtab took keen interest in preparing Sartha (Balasore) as a place to initiate the civil disobedience. This was marked by a vigorous popular enthusiasm, which provided a new ray of hope to the youthful Mahtab. He felt confident that once Gandhi issued the directive, the volunteers would capture all the *thanas* in a single day. However, he realised that, even though people, basically the young, were mentally prepared to join the civil disobedience, yet the Congress volunteers had

hardly grasped the implications of the conditions as laid down by Gandhi. Nor did they fully realise the fact of how much of courage, patience and sacrifice were needed to stand and face the organised violence of a colonial state. Further, as he clearly understood, the organisation of a civil disobedience at that juncture would not only have invited repression of British Government but would have also pushed the country backward and marginalised the already emerging anti-British popular consciousness. As he spelt out afterwards, his attitude of criticising Gandhi like many others for not ordering for a countrywide civil disobedience at that time was the result of a premature excitement. However, after coming back from Ahmedabad Congress, Mahtab's political activities got broadened.

During the first half of 1922, there occurred some incidents of the burning of houses in various places of Cuttack and Balasore. Nobody knew who were behind that nuisance. The popular impression was that the police and administration were deliberately doing it to prove how lawlessness had increased due to Non-co-operation. As opposed to it, the police spread the rumour that the Congress people themselves were behind those activities. But, ultimately people could understand that it was the police who were behind those dangerous activities, and they boycotted the police at many places. This trend of house-burning so much engulfed Balasore that a worried Mahtab, in order to find out a solution to the crisis, organised a meeting in Balasore to which the officials of the district administration were invited. The meeting was intended to devise means and ways for saving the people from this menace of house-burning. In the meeting Mahtab explained that the creed of the Congress at the moment was Non-co-operation and from which path it would never deviate. Yet, he emphasised that in a crisis like house-burning, the situation needed to be met collectively even at the cost of involving a vigilant district administration. Thus, as per his suggestion, a Town Maintenance Committee was formed. The District Magistrate was appointed as the President of the Committee and Mahtab remained as the Secretary, apart from some other members. Accordingly, the Committee supervised the

initiatives for guarding the township against possible threat of burning of houses. It also arranged for necessary and adequate provisions for meeting such eventualities. These measures considerably lessened and prevented the occurrence of such incidents. In certain cases, culprits were caught red-handed. But when the culprits were presented in the court, they behaved so peculiarly that, they were considered as mad and thus got released. Later on, from an official, Mahtab got the evidence of the indirect involvement of the administration in perpetrating such crisis to cause an ideological set-back for the Congress.

To counter this strategy, Mahtab and his comrades planned to capture the culprits who were behind the burning of houses. Mahtab could smell that these culprits were given shelter by some influential gentlemen of the town. Thus, they raided those houses but the culprits numbering eight to ten fled from the spot. However, from that day onwards, no such incident occurred again, and Mahtab prepared a detailed report on this issue subsequently.

The other significant development in Orissa during the course of Non-co-operation was the peasant unrest which engulfed the Kanika estate. The anti-feudal struggle in Kanika, which was especially ravaged by flood and famine, picked up due to the veritable policies of peasant exploitation, adopted by the Raja of Kanika. The people in Kanika were forced to pay many illegal taxes even though they had experienced scarcity of foodstuffs in 1918-19, followed by flood and famine in 1920. The relief for the famine as arranged by Raja's administration was miserably inadequate. It was in this context that when the Raja proposed to undertake a fresh settlement of land in 1922, his move was opposed by the people as it was believed widely that a new settlement was meant for a fresh hike in taxes. Moreover, the agrarian movement definitely drew inspiration from the then existing overwhelming scenario of Non-co-operation Movement. The peasants of Kanika braved to resist the oppression of the Raja in an unprecedented manner. Congress volunteers and leaders of

Orissa also extended their support to the cause of the people's struggle. The Raja, on the other hand, enjoyed immense clout in the public life of Orissa as a top leader of UUC and a close associate of M.S. Das, and who was opposed to the Congress organisation and its activities. In the face of massive popular opposition to his misrule, he could manage to convince the British authorities that the peasant movement in Kanika was essentially anti-British in character and thereby could procure the weight of the administration to suppress the rising. But, the Kanika movement emerged basically as an anti-Raja and anti-feudal struggle with its own agrarian leadership. The peasant mobilisation in Kanika reached such proportions that peasants refused to pay taxes as per the provisions of new settlement and rather deposited their dues in the Government treasury at Kendrapara instead of in Raja's treasury. In course of the rising, at places like Chhamuka of Kanika estate, some peasants died of police firing. In Feb. 1922, Mahtab distributed a leaflet criticising the Raja of Kanika for his policy of taxation and his efforts to suppress the Non-co-operation Movement. He pointed out in the pamphlet :

"The Kanika *Sarkar* thinks that it will obstruct the waves of Non-co-operation Movement by stretching out his hand. But, it should be remembered that the awakening of the people caused by NCO movement will lower the head not only of Kanika *Sarkar* but also of Delhi *Sarkar*. Now we are awakened. Let the faint light of awakening be kept up in our hearts. Eventually it will spread like wild fire, grow furious and serve as a guide to many countries."

To prevent the Congress activists from meddling in Kanika affairs and thereby encouraging the peasants to fight against the Raja, 144 Cr. P.C. was imposed in the neighbouring areas of Kanika estate to prohibit meeting regarding Kanika affairs. Mahtab however, defied the order and organised a meeting in Bhadrak, which was also attended by Gopabandhu Das and Bhagirathi Mohapatra. In the meeting a resolution was passed condemning the atrocities being perpetrated in Kanika. Interestingly, Mr. Hudson, the S.P. Balasore had advised Mahtab not to enter Kanika

nor to organise Congress activities there. The S.P.'s contention was that once Congress activists joined the Kanika peasants in their anti-Raja struggle, the Raja would get the opportunity to characterise the movement as anti-British. Mahtab, being friendly to the S.P. who was an Irishman, had practically accepted latter's views but was criticised vehemently by fellow Congress activists for his hobnobbing with the district administration as well as the police at the height of the Non-co-operation Movement. But, Mahtab felt convinced that issues like the burning of houses and the Kanika uprising should be kept beyond the orbit of Non-co-operation Movement. However, Mahtab's intention being genuine his stand over these two issues need not be misunderstood.

Meanwhile, Gopabandhu and Bhagirathi Mohapatra were arrested on the charge of holding a meeting in Bhadrak and subsequently awarded six months of imprisonment. False charges were framed against them, such as instigating the people of Kanika and beating up of the police during the burning of houses.

When the Non-co-operation Movement was suspended following the Chauri-Chaura incident, Mahtab, like many others, became critical of Gandhi's hasty decision to suspend the movement. But, once he attended the AICC meeting and listened to Gandhi's views and explanations for his decision, he became convinced that Gandhi was right in his decision. Gandhi's subsequent imprisonment for six years also disheartened Mahtab considerably.

After this development, Mahtab attempted to get in touch with Malaviya, who was by then much active in taking up various issues in different parts of the country. Mahtab and Niranjan Patnaik met Malaviya at Lucknow and briefed the latter about the developments in Orissa. He insisted that Malaviya should take up the Kanika issue immediately, to which Malaviya agreed. But, when Mahtab returned to Orissa from Lucknow to organise for the visit of Malaviya to Kanika, he was immediately arrested. Mahtab had been dogged by police spy during his visit to Lucknow. Thus, a significant move to arrange for the visit of Malaviya to Kanika was foiled.

Following his arrest, Mahtab was produced in the Court. His speeches delivered in the beginning of 1921, speeches against the atrocities perpetrated in Kanika as well as his writing in *Swaraj Samachar* were levelled as charges against him. Mahtab refused to defend himself during the trial proceedings, but, later on, he replied to the charges against him by issuing a written statement in which he pointed out :

"I can say confidently that whatever I have preached or done, can be punishable under 124 Cr. P.C. I have got the opportunity to propagate the views of Gandhi in Balasore district and Gandhi has been punished under the same charges by doing so. Whatever, I believe firmly, I have been propagating and I urge the people to consider these views and accept it. I don't force people to accept my views. My view is that the present Government is so much immoral and autocratic that it should not be allowed to continue for a moment. Nobody should try to prevent this process. This Government should disappear immediately, and this is my firm belief . . .

"The move by a minority Government to rule over one-fifth of the people of the world population for the former's interest and the effort to keep them in bondage need to be resisted by any self-respecting man at the cost of his life. . .

"It is in fact the duty of everyone to participate in NCO at least from a humanitarian point of view apart from its political standpoint. The life of a person is not to be committed to eating, sleeping and earning of money only, nor one has to act against the will of the conscience. The motto of life is very great and full of ideals. Non-co-operation Movement, has in fact, clearly spelt out these perspectives of life. As an ordinary worker of Non-co-operation, I have tried hard to do my duty with utmost sincerity and before doing it, I have realised fully well that I am punishable under 124 Cr. P.C. for these acts of mine. Indeed to mention this also that those who are directly or indirectly supporting the policy of exploitation are really culprits before God and their own conscience. . .

"I have appealed to all the Government Servants both civil and military to boycott the Government and make this exploitative machinery unworkable. Because, the self-respect of the man and his humanism are being destroyed under this Government. Right since 6 April, 1921, I have been propagating these views and distributing leaflets to this effect in all the areas of Balasore. . .

"It is noteworthy that, I don't believe in violence, nor I have ever allowed any violent activities to take shape. I am entirely responsible for Non-co-operation Movement in Balasore. But, the movement in the district is yet to be blamed on the ground of violence. I challenge my opponents everywhere to prove that this movement has a violent turn and to prove that I have preached violence. My firm belief is that, it is only through non-violence that we will achieve victory in our style. I have not preached racial hatred either. I am dead opposed to it. The Government I refer to, also includes Indian, those who have formed this Government, I am speaking to them. . .

"I am not at one with the rules which grants bail in response to good conduct. I am prepared to undergo any long spell of imprisonment, but I am not going to give any bond."

Mahtab, was finally awarded one year imprisonment. He was taken to Cuttack Jail initially. The jail life was one of intense hardship, hitherto unknown to him. He suffered from fever, lack of necessary treatment, and from the poor quality of food available in the jail. On the other hand, his stay in the jail provided him an opportunity to interact with the fellow prisoners who had been awarded sentences in connection with issues like Kanika and the burning of houses. From the Kanika prisoners, he could gather the detailed and sordid tales of oppression in that estate. He was almost filled with vengeance when a prisoner narrated an event in Kanika that under the Raja's instruction, a woman was gangraped before her husband and the husband turned mad following the incident. Greatly moved by such stories, Mahtab developed a deep sympathy for the oppressed people of Kanika and this made him forget his hardships in the jail, and his restlessness to get back to

his family. After staying for a month in the Cuttack Jail, he was shifted to Bhagalpur Jail. It was really a shocking moment for Mahtab. For, after all, he had been so intimate with the prisoners of Kanika that he hardly felt like leaving them. But, he had by now developed a determination that, once out of jail, he would take up the Kanika issue in right earnest.

Mahtab had to undergo a lot of physical hardships in the Bhagalpur Jail. Shackles were put in the legs and hands of the prisoners. Nehru who had once visited the Bhagalpur Jail during this time was shocked to see the distress of the prisoners and had promised to arrange for their release. But, Mahtab could overcome the jail torture by practising *Yoga* and devoting time to reading religious literature like *Gita* and *Bhagavat* etc. He also managed to procure a few newspapers secretly by the warders of the jail. Mahtab also found time to go through Tilak's *Gita*, the Bible and the literature of Tagore. The reading of Tilak's *Gita* offered him great solace during the jail period.

As a prisoner Mahtab managed to get the job of an Assistant to the Accountant in the blanket factory of the Bhagalpur Jail. Thus, he devoted a major part of his jail time towards reading, writing and typing. It was during this time that he could manage to write a novel titled *Ajaba Duniya* in Oriya. The novel betrayed his emotions during his jail experience. Written in lucid and simple language, the novel projected his perception of life and condition of the period. Besides, he also wrote a book titled *Free Thinking*. Some portions of this writing were later published in the *Star of Utkal* edited by L.N. Sahu. Unfortunately, *Ajaba Duniya* was seized by the police during 1930, when the police searched the *Swaraj Mandir* premise in Balasore. Apart from these activities, Mahtab regularly started holding correspondence with his friends and Congress workers in Balasore. This he had to do with utmost secrecy, thanks to the help of some of the jail staff. He also received many letters from his friends and political associates as to what happened to Gandhian promise of '*Swaraj* in a

year' and as to what should they do at that critical juncture. Mahtab, upset by these queries and himself perplexed, ventured to advise the people through his letters that people had to take up serving the nation as a life-time career till *Swaraj* was attained. What really disturbed Mahtab most during this period was the news of formation of Swaraj Party by C.R. Das and Motilal Nehru and the call of the Swaraj Party to enter legislature. He thought that in contrast to the principle of Non-co-operation, if somebody took to legislature, how could he serve the people at large. Besides, as Gandhi was arrested and jailed for 6 years, how could he wait patiently till Gandhi's release to seek his views and advice on this account. Mahtab, equally got disturbed by the idea that if at all he went back to lead a household life, how could he reconcile to that reality?

It was in this conflicting state of mind, that he was released from the jail. Once released, he straightway went to Hazaribag and met Gopabandhu. The discussion with the latter convinced him that Gopabandhu was supportive of the ideas propagated by the Swaraj Party. But, Mahtab stood by Gandhian principles. From Harzaribag, he came to Balasore where people had arranged to offer him a grand reception. Mahtab however, deliberately reached a day in advance to ensure that the public reception did not take place. He had the feeling that when the country was facing a critical time, he did not deserve to be given a grand welcome.

III

POLITICS OF SWARAJ AND MAHTAB : 1923-29

Once out of jail and back in Orissa, Mahtab to his utter dismay found that the Congress workers throughout the province were disillusioned. The PCC was almost defunct. Congress *Ashrams* functioned in a low key. In these circumstances, Gopabandhu Choudhury, Niranjan Patnaik and Mahtab grouped together and resolved to take up the Congress organisational work with zeal and a sense of dedication. Accordingly, it was decided that Gopabandhu Choudhury would supervise village reconstruction activities, Niranjan Patnaik would take up *khadi* work and Mahtab be entrusted with the responsibility of Congress campaign as well as the activities of PCC. Thus, Mahtab toured the entire province, visited Congress *Ashrams* and kept encouraging the Congress activists everywhere. Besides, Mahtab brought out a weekly journal entitled the *Prajatantra* from Mukur Press. The objective of this organ was to propagate the Gandhian values as well as constructive programmes throughout Orissa. The *Prajatantra* was regularly sent to all the Congress *Ashrams* of the province.

Side by side with Congress campaign, Mahtab also took up the cause of the peasants in their fight against the exploitation of the *Zamindars*. In one instance, a peasant in Balasore was killed by an official of the *zamindar* and the latter attempted to suppress the matter taking advantage of his connection with the police and some top government officials. But, Mahtab intervened in the issue and insisted on investigation which led to the filing of a case

against the *zamindar*. Eventhough the murder case was established as true in the court, yet due to lack of evidence, the guilty was set free. It was, however, exposed that it was due to the manipulation of the police that the murder case was suppressed. Consequently, due to popular anger which the incident evoked the concerned police official had to resign and got himself pensioned off. It was during this time that, Mahtab and his fellow comrades of *Swaraj Mandir* in Balasore took a pledge to live a life of austerity and not to take to household life, till *Swaraj* was attained. Such demonstration of dedication to the cause of *Swaraj* gave a new image to the Congress, creating an impression that the Congressmen were selfless servants of the people.

Despite his busy political preoccupations, Mahtab was constantly bogged down by the pressure exerted by his parents and his wife to lead a settled household life. But, by now, his determination had scaled such heights that he openly refused to agree to their advice and even could prevail upon his wife, Subhadra Devi, to join the Congress and take to a life of suffering.

The perceptible change in the activities of Mahtab during this phase was seen in terms of increasing radicalisation of his views as a Congress activist. More precisely, in the wake of the suspension of Non-co-operation, this could also be seen in terms of an ideological transformation of Mahtab towards radical socialist views under the ideological weight of leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru. Yet, he hardly distanced himself from the avowed Gandhian method while carefully holding on to his radical ideals.

What indeed worried the Congress activists in those days was the acute financial crisis to carry on their political activities. Even they had to starve at times. Thanks to Mahtab's efforts, however, some patriotic persons came forward to help the party by their timely donations or contributions to the Congress coffer.

When Mahtab established a printing press of his own in Balasore to publish the weekly *Prajatantra*, he had to borrow Rs. 2000/- from a moneylender, who was not in good terms with

Mahtab's father. The former's intention, of course was to keep the son of his opponent under his influence. However, with the establishment of the press, the weekly *Prajatantra* could be regular in publication and when its subscribers increased in number, there could be some income for the Congress Party.

It was at this time that the Swaraj Party adopted the political stance of entering legislatures. In contrast, the no-changers or the Gandhians endorsed the programme of constructive activities and accordingly decided to work in *Zilla* Board and Municipality to give fillip to such activities. Mahtab, in agreement with the Gandhian line of thought decided to utilise the District Board and the Municipality for people's welfare. To the supporters of the Swaraj Party, he issued his note of veiled warning that it was not proper to upset the Gandhian programmes precisely at a time when Gandhi was inside the jail.

In those days, as Mahtab saw, the District Board and the Municipality were usually monopolised by influential lawyers, big *Zamindars* and some rich men of the district. In order to reverse that trend, he thought it necessary to induct more and more Congress workers into those institutions in order to inject a new life into these bodies.

Thus, for the first time, Congress workers went in for a massive campaign during the elections to the Municipalities and the District Boards. Congress members, no wonder, won with big margin of votes. Owing to the well-organised efforts by the Congress activists, the non-Congress elements failed to dominate those institutions any longer. Mahtab himself was chosen as the Chairman of the District Board, of his own district.

By getting into the Municipality, the Congress activists sought to forge a popular linkage through the activities of the Municipality. And no wonder, due to their activities, people realised that Municipality did really exist and it had certain functions as far as welfare of the people was concerned.

It was through these activities that Mahtab and other Congress activists became more popular in public esteem. As the Chairman of the District Board, Mahtab prepared a comprehensive plan for the provision of medicines, drinking water and for spread of education in the district. He could overcome the opposition of the authorities due to the liberal attitude of the then Collector, Mr. Johnstone. In spite of Johnstone's known hostility towards Gandhian ideology, Mahtab could cultivate friendship with him, which helped the former in transforming the pro-government and a defunct District Board into a powerful popular organisation.

Under Mahtab's able leadership, schools, hospitals and rural level assets were made free from the control of the rural rich and were effectively used for people's benefit.

While acting as the Chairman, Mahtab became successful in resisting an attempt by the Government to curtail whatever power was available to popular representatives. He could also successfully fight back the bureaucracy and the landlords due to his personal influence on the Collector and in one instance, foiled the manipulation of some big officials in capturing pasture lands in Chandipur and Nilgiri. His determined stand even led to the dismissal of the two officials.

During this phase Mahtab also got himself involved in Kanika affairs. As Chairman of the District Board, he undertook many welfare works in Kanika like digging of ponds and wells. The motive was to lend all sorts of moral support to Chakradhar Behera, the man who was emerging as a peasant leader to fight against the tyranny of the *Raja* of Kanika estate.

The series of welfare works in Kanika led the people to believe that the days of *Raja's* rule were numbered and they organised themselves to initiate the process of boycotting the landlord's officers. It was precisely at this time that under the pressure of public opinion, the Government took up the issue of land settlement in Kanika. This new settlement helped the people to protect their rights as well as to demand for the scaling down of

exorbitant rents. Further, this made the people feel as if they had won the battle against the *Raja*. These developments finally resulted in the proposal for a compromise between the *Raja* and his subjects. Under the initiative of the District Magistrate, Gopabandhu Das, as the representative of the people, met the *Raja* for the proposed settlement. But, the dialogue broke down as the conditions advanced by the people were not acceptable to the *Raja*. Following this, the conflict between the Kanika *Raja* and the people further worsened. The *Raja* alongwith many other landlords grouped together against Mahtab and even against Mr. Johnstone. But, Mahtab continued to highlight the popular discontent in Kanika and raised his voice against the Government officials who supported the cause of landlords.

Side by side, Mahtab brought out an English weekly titled *Adventure* to focus on the exploitation of the Kanika *Raja* in particular and of the feudal lords in general. The objective of the weekly was to draw the attention of British officials to the exploitation perpetrated on peasants. Thus, the image of the 'Kanika Dal' (the *Raja* and his supporters in the estate as well as in Government circles in the province) got lowered in public esteem. But, finally, due to the conspiracy of the 'Kanika Dal', all the pro-Congress officials in Balasore district including Mr. Johnstone, were transferred from their posts, the latter being demoted to the post of a Deputy Magistrate. The reactionary forces could convince the Government that Congress activities were gaining substantial base in the district because of these people. Further, Mahtab's nomination paper for the subsequent election to the District Board was also declared invalid.

But, in the meantime and under changed political scenario, Mahtab was elected to Bihar Orissa Legislative Assembly from Bhadrak. In addition, he was appointed as the Whip of the Swaraj Party in the Assembly. During his tenure in the Assembly, he sought to focus on the popular exploitation of the people in Kanika and took up the issue of salt manufacturing by the people in Balasore

District. In that year, Balasore was ravaged by flood, and on that plea, Mahtab wanted that people in Balasore should be allowed to manufacture salt freely for a year. Besides, he also arranged for flood relief measures. The flood of 1927 was indeed devastating, though the official report suggested that the amount of loss in the district was negligible. In response, Mahtab and other Congress activists undertook massive tour of the flood-affected areas of the district. The magnitude of the problems and difficulties faced by the people were focussed through photographs in the *Prajatantra*. This not only encouraged the flood victims, but also brought out the truth of the agonies of the people in due perspective. What was more important was the fact that, it was a virtual contradiction of the official report and Mahtab's report on the flood was approved by the Government instead of the official report. Accordingly, the relief measures were organised on liberal terms. In addition, Mahtab also co-ordinated the relief efforts of Aggarwal Panchayat of Calcutta, Marwari Relief Society, Gujarat Relief Party, Ram Krishna Mission and Bharat Sevashram of Bhadrak. It was due to his efforts that the relief assistance for Balasore from all sources stood at Rs.9 lakhs. The foundation of Mahtab's future national leadership was being laid during the days of the post Non-co-operation era while he was engaged in various enterprises, drawing attention of others. For instance, he helped C.F. Andrews in his anti-opium movement when Andrews stayed in *Swaraj Ashram* of Balasore on request of Mahtab. Similarly, Horace Alexander visited Kanika under the persuasion of Mahtab. Afterwards, Alexander in his book titled *Indian Ferment* mentioned about the misrule in Kanika stating that the *Raja* of Kanika was exploiting the people through the help of the Government.

When Gandhi undertook a visit to Orissa during 1927, Mahtab arranged for the Mahatma's accommodation in a village called Charbatia under Bhadrak Subdivision for two days in order to brief him about the sad plight of the poor people owing to the oppressive system perpetuated by the *Raja* of Kanika estate. Gandhi, however, advised Mahtab that Kanika be kept away from the purview of

Congress activities as the time was not yet ripe for people's unrest against local landlords and ruling chiefs of native states. Not convinced by Gandhi's views Mahtab presented a vivid picture of the real situation and raised the question, "how to ask the people who were beaten and abused, to tolerate such oppressions and at the same time practise non-violence?" In reply, Mahatma Gandhi said. "I understand what you say. The *Karmee* should work according to the situation. Non-violence is the best method. . . The *Karmee* should make people conscious according to the prevailing condition. During Champaran *Satyagraha*, when people fled at the sight of the police, I scolded them and told them that they should even beat the police. But, if I extend a call to the public to beat the police openly, it will have a bad effect on the people. . . The *Karmee* should take up the responsibility according to the prevailing situation and should try to take the people towards full non-violence or the quality of *satya*. The way you interpret non-violence is not my way of looking at it, that's why I call my non-violence a dynamic one".

Be it noted here that Gandhi's prime concern at that time of the Indian movement was to rouse the political consciousness of a suppressed population to face the oppressor with courage by the moral power of Truth and Non-violence and not to indulge in stray incidents of violence which might defeat the very purpose of his non-violent revolution. He advised Mahtab to make Congress workers aware of their local responsibilities only in the perspective of higher national objectives.

Mahtab sought to impress upon Gandhi that a movement against salt law could be more meaningful in Orissa instead of emphasis of *khadi* work. To this proposal, Gandhi asked Mahtab to arrange at least 25 dedicated *Satyagrahis* who would be ready to sacrifice their lives. On an impulse, Mahtab assured that there could be many such people to join the struggle, but did not think it worthwhile to pursue the matter with Gandhi further.

The Gandhian movement had yet a long way to go whereas

the forces of imperialism still held a strong sway. The reactionary elements represented by the notorious *Kanika Dal* plotted to marginalise the dominance of Mahtab in his own district by getting back their hold in the District Board, which had almost entirely been taken over by the Congress forces with Mahtab as the Chairman. The unholy nexus of the *Raja* and the rich landlords cooked up different plans to defame Mahtab. Once the Board was controlled by these forces, they systematically reversed all the progressive measures undertaken by the Congress-dominated Board. Mahtab was at great pains to see the development and realised that unless and until the *Swaraj* was attained, no permanent welfare work could be taken up in the country.

The enemies struck further . A case was filed against him in connection with his election to the Bihar and Orissa legislature. The High Court in its verdict held Mahtab guilty of submitting false accounts of his election expenditure and declared his election invalid. It was also decided that he could not participate in the elections for the next five years. It was widely believed that two of the High Court Judges were bribed by the Kanika *Raja* to pass judgement against Mahtab. Following the verdict, a criminal case was also framed against him for submitting wrong accounts of his election expenditure.

Simultaneously, the audit report of the District Board charged Mahtab with overspending of money in his capacity as the Chairman of the District Board and he was asked to pay back Rs. 1 lakh in that connection. The Commissioner who was instrumental in bringing out this audit report had nurtured a grudge against Mahtab for having published a report in *Adventure* holding the above said officer guilty of protecting a landlord who had raped a minor girl. The Patna High Court too had delivered an adverse report against the Commissioner over the issue.

Though the charges against Mahtab really demoralised him, yet he faced the crisis with equanimity. Precisely it was at this time that he found himself isolated when most of his loyal friends thought

it prudent to desert him. The Kanika *Raja* felt jubilant enough that the crisis would spell an end to Mahtab's political career. In such situation however, Mahtab was profusely encouraged by Gopabandhu Das to face the situation bravely. The *Search Light* published from Patna also defended Mahtab's case and sought to mobilise popular opinion in his favour. A press campaign, no doubt considerably enhanced his image in public esteem. More interestingly, Mahtab's father encouraged him not to lose heart; and on her death bed, his foster mother too expressed satisfaction for having adopted him as a son.

When the news that Mahtab had to pay back Rs. 1 lakh surcharge to the Government spread, people in general came forward to raise the amount through donation. But Mahtab refused to accept help and insisted that in case the amount was to be refunded by him, then all the works of the District Board done under his chairmanship should be transferred to the name of Mahtab. His argument was, the Government could not take both the money as well as the works done through that amount.

Meanwhile, the circulation of the *Prajatantra* and the *Adventure* went-up considerably. Besides, Mahtab involved himself in the popular struggle in Nilgiri against the feudal practice of *Magan* or the forcible collection. He compiled a book called *Nilgiri Atyachar* (*Nilgiri Atrocities*) after collecting the complaints of the people against the Nilgiri ruler. This heightened the tension in Nilgiri while enhancing the prestige of Mahtab as a leader of the oppressed people.

It may be mentioned here that it was during the Nilgiri agitation that Mahtab experimented with a novel method of non-violent resistance movement against a tyrannical ruler of a princely state. Following his instruction and direction, the exploited people of Nilgiri left their homes as a mark of protest to demonstrate a unique method of *Satyagraha*. People in thousands left Nilgiri and settled in Balasore. Ultimately it was C.F. Andrews who intervened in this painful affair and a settlement was reached with

the *Raja* of Nilgiri. Afterwards, Andrews mentioned this incident in the book *India and Simon Commission*. The method of mass exodus was later on adopted in some other princely states of India including Bardoli.

In 1928, Mahtab formed an association of Oriyas in Calcutta in order to enhance the consciousness of Oriyan identity. The association was called the *Oriya Samaja* which protected the interest of the Oriya workers in Calcutta who numbered hundreds of thousands.

Mahtab was finally declared innocent by the court on the surcharge case. But unfortunately, the moment he was relieved of the persisting mental agony, he received the most shocking news of the death of Gopabandhu Das. What worried him most was as to what would happen to Congress after Gopabandhu.

With the departure of the *Utkalmani* (Jewel of Orissa) from political scene, Mahtab thought of resuming his political activities with full vigour and started taking up constructive and *khadi* activities. He also took a vow not to involve himself in District Board activities for at least 10 years. He also took time off to preoccupy himself in writing some literature. During this period, he wrote *Punyatma Gopabandhu*, *Chasa Bhai*, *Palasi Abasane*. These works were intended to mobilise nationalist opinion and to initiate the trend of mass literature in Orissa. *Palasi Abasane* was so patriotic that it was banned by the Government. Besides, writing in the *Prajatantra* became his favourite preoccupation. It sought to highlight the misery of the people in the princely states. The *Prajatantra* became a platform against popular exploitation and also stood as a symbol of opposition to the autocratic rule in the states.

When the *Purna Swaraj* Resolution was passed in the Lahore Session of the Congress in 1929, Mahtab was seriously thinking of a mass movement which appeared inevitable. Alongwith Surendranath Das (popularly styled as *Sardar*) he desperately

tried to start the Movement in Balasore. At first, they started organising meetings for the abolition of the salt tax in the district. As Mahtab afterwards recalled, he felt often surprised to think, how could he anticipate a mass movement around 'salt' before the Gandhian *Salt Satyagraha*!

IV

MAHTAB AND CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE MOVEMENT

Mahtab alongwith Gopabandhu Das, Nilakantha Das and Niranjan Patnaik attended the Lahore session of the Indian National Congress in 1929. Back from there, with a new spirit of agitation, they provided leadership to the PCC to organise a province-wide campaign for propagating *Purna Swaraj* resolution. The PCC decided to organise the observance of Independence Day on 26 January, 1930. It was resolved to step up the campaign around the issues of untouchability and *khadi* and boycott of foreign goods in rural areas.¹

Side by side, the PCC sought to consolidate its mass base by strengthening constructive activities. In an appeal to the people, in his capacity as the President of the PCC, Mahtab emphasised on the need to have a wide net-work of constructive activities on the basis of which the non-violent war against the British would commence. While explaining that the Mahatma had been appointed as the supreme general to fight for attaining complete independence, he appealed to the rich to contribute to the Congress funds as per their mite and advised the common people to come forward as *karmees* to join the movement for *Swaraj*. He asked the common people to realise that the Congress was fighting a non-violent war with the British for the benefit of the 'poor'.²

1. *The Samaja* 22.1.30

2. *The Samaja*, 19.2.30

Gandhi's decision to hold the 'Dandi March' in connection with the breaking of the Salt Law carried a special appeal to the people of Orissa who inhabited its coastal belt. This was primarily because the salt trade was an ancient trade of Orissa absorbing labour and capital of the region. The manufacturing of salt in Orissa coast was a pre-colonial phenomenon and it was an important source of income for the Oriya people. The colonial administration deprived them of this important source of income by imposing its monopoly on salt.³

The salt issue, in fact, had bothered the nationalist leadership of Orissa for quite some time. Gopabandhu had highlighted the problem in the Bihar and Orissa Legislative Assembly in 1918.⁴ And, Mahtab himself had proposed that the salt tax be made an issue for a popular movement during Gandhi's visit to Orissa in 1925.⁵

The idea of *Salt Satyagraha* had again been advanced by Mahtab to Gandhi during the latter's visit to Orissa on the eve of the Civil Disobedience Movement.⁶ In fact, people in the coastal districts had registered their protest against the Salt Law by violating it on several occasions prior to the Salt Satyagraha of 1930. This is illustrated by the following table.⁷

No. of violations of Salt Law.

Year	Cuttack	Puri	Balasore
1927-28	83	150	46
1928-29	40	55	46

A large number of violations of salt laws in Balasore district

3. *The Samaja*, 5.3.30

4. *Bihar and Orissa Legislative Assembly Proceedings*. 13 September, 1919.

5. Mahtab, *Gandhiji O' odissa* pp. 181-87.

6. Mahtab and De (ed.). *History of Freedom Movement in Orissa*, Vol.III, p. 85

7. *The Report on the Administration of the Salt Department in Bihar and Orissa during the years 1927-31* Cuttack, 1929-32.

prior to Civil Disobedience Movement, perhaps prompted Mahtab to suggest to Gandhi to launch a movement against the salt law. In the background of aforesaid development the PCC met on 16 March at Balasore and endorsed the plan to launch the *Salt Satyagraha* in Orissa when Gandhi himself began his *Dandi March*. Gopabandhu Choudhury was appointed as the '*dictator*' for the overall conduct and organisation of the movement.

Inchudi in Balasore was selected as the site for the breaking of the Salt Law. Mahtab was kept in charge of organising the movement in Balasore.⁸ With the selection of the site for the inauguration of the agitation at Inchudi, the preparatory campaign caused a strong ferment in Balasore. Under the initiatives of Mahtab and Surendranath Das, twelve volunteers were trained to clear up tanks and reservoirs in Inchudi, Srijanga and other neighbouring villages of Balasore.⁹ The British authorities later on conceded the fact that "the campaign has been more energetically pushed in Balasore than in Bihar."¹⁰

On 6th April 1930, the day on which Gandhiji broke the Salt Law at Dandi, the first batch of *Satyagrahis* led by Gopabandhu Choudhury and Acharya Harihar Das began their journey from Cuttack to Inchudi. On their way, however, the leader of the march, Gopabandhu Choudhury was arrested. Yet, on 13 April 1930, Acharya Harihar Das and other *Satyagrahis* offered *Satyagraha* at Inchudi by picking up salt in violation of Salt laws. Afterwards, several batches of *Satyagrahis* arrived at Inchudi to break the salt laws.. A batch of *Satyagrahis* came all the way from Gujarat to Inchudi. Similarly, women led by Rama Devi offered *Satyagraha* at that site. Rani Bhagyabati Pata Mahadevi of Kujanga along with nearly 500 women volunteers violated salt laws at Kunjanga of Cuttack. Campaign against as well as violations of salt laws continued in Puri and Ganjam districts also. Following

8. *Home Political Department, Fortnightly report*; hereafter, *HPD, FNR*, 2nd half of March, 1930.

9. Mahtab (ed.), *History of Freedom Movement in Orissa*, Vol. V, pp. 3-27

10. *HPD, FNR*, 2nd half of April, 1930

these events, popular enthusiasm for *Salt Satyagraha* marked a new high throughout the province. Volunteers from Koraput and Sambalpur districts (the non-coastal areas) joined the *Satyagrahis* of coastal Orissa. The tribals of Koraput, in many cases, increasingly resorted to forest *Satyagraha* by violating existing forest laws, under the overall ideological weight of the Gandhian Civil Disobedience Movement.

As the salt movement petered out by June with the onset of rains, the PCC planned to renew the preparation of salt from December when the climate would again permit the manufacture of salt. But a new form of *Satyagraha* emerged in the district in the form of non-payment of *Chaukidari* tax which the people considered as oppressive. The local activists like Goura Mohan Das and Narayan Prasad Das held meetings over the issue and encouraged people not to pay *chaukidari* tax claiming that *chaukidari* tax payment had been "forbidden by the Congress people". As a result people refused to pay the tax. The villagers also harassed the *chaukidars* by refusing water to them and destroying their crops and threatening them in other ways. Consequently, a police party first reached Srijanga on 11 July to punish the law breakers. But the villagers greeted the police party by observing *hartal* and holding a meeting. The police party was totally boycotted. Food provisions were withheld from them and shelters for their accommodation in the village refused. On 12 July, the Sub-Inspector arrived with the tax collectors for collection of the tax. But not a single person turned up for the payment even if they were sent for. As a result, the police decided to move inside the village to realise the tax by attachment of property. While on their way, the police first arrested some of the local leaders and brought them to the police camp with a motive to make others feel frightened. But, conch-shells were blown by the women from different parts of the village and a 'mob' instantly collected. It demanded the release of the captives. But, as the police refused to agree to the demand, this led to a forcible 'rescue' of the leaders and assault by *lathis* on police party including the

sub-inspector, *choukidars* and *daffadars* as well as the local president who was in charge of collection. They all received serious injuries. In the confusion, the arrested people escaped from the police custody. The court judgement over the case observed that : "...the story that anybody would dare to advocate non-payment in the presence of police would not be believed. This is an argument that has no force in the present days of deliberate defiance of laws".

Following the incident, an additional police force was posted at Srijanga and adjoining villages. The armed troops unleashed a virtual reign of terror. Additionally, a punitive fine of Rs.6000/- was imposed on Srijanga and the adjacent villages. But, popular protest against imposition of additional police force continued to persist and a campaign was carried on asking people to refuse the payment of the tax. Despite all the precautions, the actual collection of 'dues' could not commence before 4 Jan, 1931. A determined opposition to government by the villagers seemed to persist even after the incident. By the end of September, the authority could arrest only two of the 72 accused.

It is important here to note that Mahtab undertook the campaign for the release of the convicted persons in Srijanga case all through. As early as 31 April (after Gandhi-Irwin Pact), Mahtab (President, PCC) in his letter to the Chief Secretary, Hallett observed: "As regards the Srijanga case, there is not evidence to show that the convicted persons actually committed violence themselves. The whole evidence against them is that they were in the excited crowd. Such people, I submit, are entitled to the privileges of the terms of Gandhi-Irwin Agreement..."

Again in another letter to Chief Secretary, during May 1931, he noted :

"That the police officers have been seriously injured at Srijanga should not bias the judgement of the authorities. The degree of seriousness of injuries in different cases should not alter the principle common in all of them. The principle which holds

good in the Muzaffarpur case should hold good in the Srijanga case." He went on to add that : "the accused persons in the Srijanga case should come under Delhi pact in spite of the decision of the High Court in view of the evidence against the individuals convicted." Around June, Mahtab almost threatened the Government, while appealing for the release of prisoners. He pointed out to the Chief Secretary : "Even if the Srijanga prisoners do not come under the Delhi pact, are they not entitled to the mercy of Government, which exists in spite of the pact? I tell you, so long as the Srijanga prisoners are in the jail, Orissa people will never forget the past. The matter of Srijanga prisoners touches the public mind very much at the present moment. . . move Government to release the Srijanga prisoners to ease the public opinion and increase their (Government's) popularity."¹¹

By June 1930, the PCC decided to carry on other aspects of the nationalist programme such as picketing of excise shops, boycott of foreign cloth and spread of khadi work. The overall orientation in terms of propagating the principles of *Satyagraha* co-existed with the organisational drive to recruit volunteers. The *Swaraj Ashram* at Cuttack, Mahtab's *Ashram* at Balasore and *Utkal Swaraj Ashram* of Berhampur remained the nerve centres for organising such activities.

Another significant aspect of the movement was the wide circulation of pamphlets, booklets and literature with out and out nationalist orientation.

Two important booklets viz : *Swarajpala* and *Palasi Abasane* were authored by Mahtab, copies of which were seized. A Congress activist, Bhagirathi Das of Binjharpur, was prosecuted for holding

11. For the development in *Srijangh*, the following sources are crucial:
HPD Judgement on Srijanga case; (ACC-286);
Who's who compilation Committee, (wwcc), ACC-56; Report of S.P., Balasore, 15.7.31;
Report of D.M., Balasore, 13.3.31;
HPD, Mahatab's letter to Chief Secretary (Bihar and Orissa), Hallette, 27.4.31, 8.5.31, 16.6.31 (ACC-307); Mahtab (ed.) *Op. cit.* Vol. p. 90, etc.

a meeting at Amanglbad (13 June 1930). "His offence was that he had read out extracts from *Palasi Abasane* to '500 people' in the meeting. The audience had been greatly excited by the words they heard." This points to a novel method of popular mobilisation.¹²

It is during this period that both the *Samaja* and the *Prajatantra* shot up to the position of being the leading nationalist newspapers of Orissa. The latter inaugurated its regular publication from 13 April remaining under the overall supervision of Mahtab. During the period of *Salt Satyagraha*, the *Prajatantra* often used to be published twice a day. It remained a strong mouthpiece of Balasore DCC in particular. Security from these two newspapers was demanded on several occasions during this phase of movement for their anti-British venom.¹³

Another wave of *Salt Satyagraha* commenced around Dec. 1930, with the climate permitting the manufacture of salt. Due to the ban on Congress organisation, the Congress headquarters of the district had been shifted to a French enclave known as Pharsidinga located at a distance from the town of Balasore. In order to avoid arrest, quite a number of *Satyagrahis* of the district had sneaked into Pharsidinga as early as July and had established a Congress *Ashram* there. Under the leadership of the *Sardar* (Surendranath Das) who functioned from Pharsidinga, the salt manufacturing activities at Inchudi again got organised and co-ordinated around December-January. But, compared to the first wave of *Salt Satyagraha*, the Dec-Jan phase remained fairly marginal and largely confined to the nerve centre of Inchudi.

However, for the overall conduct of the Salt Movement, Nehru congratulated the people of Orissa for their "sacrifice and sufferings."¹⁴ It was believed that Mahtab and Sardar Surendra's organisational skills had gone into the making of the success of

12. HPD, Report of S.P., Cuttack, 7.8.30,

13. HPD, Balasore DM's report on vernacular newspapers of 1930, ACC-300.

14. *The Samaja*, 4.3.31.

15. Infact, Mahtab viewed that Inchudi stood second only to *Dandi* in terms of popular mobilisation around salt issue. Mahtab, *Sadhanara Pathe*, p. 129.

'Inchudi' March dittoing 'Dandi'.¹⁵ The roster of *Satyagrahi* participants in different districts was a bulky one. In this context, Mahtab's observation that the prominent leaders of 'Quit India' Movement got themselves schooled by 'salt politics' seems to be quite correct.¹⁶ The radical nationalists of the mid-30s and 40s, had indeed steeled themselves for future role during the salt struggle.

The Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930-31 (hereafter CDM) was suspended with the truce between Gandhi and Irwin signed on 5 March, 1931. The truce has at times been viewed as a sort of betrayal of the movement by the Gandhian leadership. On the other hand, it can be argued that in the Gandhian notion of politics the non-mass phase of the movement that followed the mass phase was equally important in terms of the consolidation of the nationalist hegemony.

Gandhi-Irwin Pact was generally looked upon as a victory in most parts of Orissa. The perception was that Congress had scored a big triumph over the Government. The leaders, released from jail (after the signing of the pact) were received by huge crowds in different places. As Mahtab felt, the impression which got rooted in the mind of the people was that the British had been crushed to a considerable extent and that the truce was of a temporary nature. The Chief Secretary (Government of Bihar and Orissa) in his letter to the Commissioner, Orissa observed : "...as a result of Irwin-Gandhi settlement, many Congress leaders regard the settlement as an opportunity to reorganise their position and prepare themselves for a greater movement in future."¹⁷

The leadership which was hailed so popularly tried to function with greater determination. This enthusiasm was even more marked at the cadre base of the movement. The local leadership displayed fair amount of response and innovation in

16. Mahtab, *Sadhanara Pathe*, p. 128

17. HPD, Letter of Chief Secretary to Commissioner, Orissa, 9.6.31

organising constructive activities undertaken so as to ensure continuity in the non mass-movement phase following the truce of March 1931. Moreover, the emphasis on the aspects of constructive programme was mainly intended for the spread of anti-colonial ideology.

To provide momentum to such activities, a training camp was organised in October under the initiative of *Gandhi Karma Mandir* of Balasore, for enrolling volunteers and their training.¹⁸ Floated by Mahtab, it was based on the model of *Sabarmati Ashram* of Gandhi to popularise *khadi* and impart training on rural reconstruction as well as literacy campaign.¹⁹ According to official reports, the overall intention of the Congress workers was "to utilise the settlement for rallying Congress forces for a battle which will be rendered in future."²⁰

The Orissa wing of the *Hindustani Seva Dal* i.e. *Utkala Gopabandhu Sevaka Bahini* was inaugurated in Cuttack.²¹ It organised a month long training camp from 6 September 1931. The volunteers who graduated from the training centre were called *Sainikas*. Mr. Balsarvar and his wife of Hindustani Seva Dal took charge of the training camp at Cuttack centre.

Two such camps were established in Puri under the initiative of Acharya Harihar Das.²² This caused anxiety to authorities who contemplated drastic action against the activists of the *Seva Dal*. On 30 December, when the *Seva Dal* volunteers took out a processioin in Puri town, they were served with prohibitory orders. The next day, when the volunteers again marched around in a procession under the stewardship of Balsarvar and Mahtab, the

18. *HPD*, Report of D.M., Balasore to Commissioner, Orissa, 23.10.31.

19. Mhatab, *Op. Cit.* Vol. V, p-14.

20. *HPD*, *FNR*, 2nd half of April 1931.

21. *HPD*, Report of D.S.P., Cuttack to D.M. Cuttack, 9.10.31, and *HPD*, *FNR*, Ist half of October.

22. *AICC Papers*, F.No. F.1, PCC to AICC, 6.12.31.

processionists were obstructed by the police. The police snatched away the *lathis* of the processionists and arrested Balsarvar.

Mahtab, registered his protest over the issue by writing to AICC : "Volunteer camps attract popular sympathy successfully... . Police is terrorising people not to support such camps."²³ The *Seva Dal* also proposed to use volunteers in controlling crowd and traffic during the festivals of *Kartik Purnima* in November 1931.²⁴

Throughout the post-March 1931 phase, the leadership protested strongly against any atrocities perpetrated by the police. For instance, the Sambalpur DCC registered a complaint to the PCC as regards the police excesses vis-a-vis Congress sponsored activities. In response, Mahtab on behalf of the PCC 'ordered a public enquiry' against the Deputy Commissioner of Police in Sambalpur and asked him to be present. He pointed out that "the alleged high-handedness of the executive authorities. . . not compatible with letters and spirit of Gandhi-Irwin agreement as well as the conduct of Congress workers with reference to the said agreement." The official comment over the issue was that "Congress still assumes to itself the position of a parallel Government. . . position which has been supposedly accorded to Congress leaders by the agreement (Gandhi-Irwin Pact)".²⁵

The 46th session of the AICC was proposed to be held at Puri during 1932. In view of this, the activities of various volunteer *Dals* were intensified. A total of 160 cadets including 35 women cadets were being trained in different centres of Cuttack, Puri and Balasore. It was planned to raise 1,000 trained cadres by the end of 1931 with the assistance of *Hindustan Seva Dal*. The PCC also requisitioned *Hindi Pracharakas* and teachers from U.P. and Bihar to teach Hindi to the cadres. But these activities were severely repressed by the authorities. Condemning the repression, Mahtab wrote to Sardar Patel : "the prohibitory orders have

23. AICC Papers, F.No. F.1, Mahtab to President, AICC, 2.12.31.

24. AICC Papers, F.No. P.1, D.M. (Puri) to Secy. Puri DCC, 22.11.31.

25. HPD, FNR, Ist half of June 1931, and Mahtab, *Op. Cit.*, Vol. V.

created much resentment in the province and these are very humiliating . . ." . He also expressed the urgency and necessity to begin a defensive CDM in Orissa.²⁶ The proposed AICC session in Orissa was cancelled due to the renewed ban on the Congress Organisation by the Government. However, the PCC had made a lot of organisational effort in preparation of the session in terms of enrolment of volunteers and raising of funds.

A fresh phase of CDM was resumed in January, 1932 and it continued till 1934 in the face of heavy repressive policy resorted to by the authorities. This phase as usual, was marked by *hartals*, political meetings, conferences, boycott of foreign cloth, picketing of liquor shops, propagation of *khadi*, underground *Ashram* activities and circulation of nationalist literature. In the very beginning of this phase, the leader as well as volunteers were rearrested. Once again the effort was to organise the movement in Balasore district from Pharasidinga, the French enclave. The leadership as well as the volunteers had gone underground by camping in Pharasidinga and co-ordinating the movement in the district. Congress volunteers "one by one daily in plain clothes" came to Balasore for organising procession and picketing. A large group of volunteers in 'plain clothes' were despatched to tour the rural pockets of the district to raise funds and enrol fresh recruits for the movement.²⁷ Under Mahtab's direction, the nationalist newspaper *Prajatantra* carried appeals of Congress leaders and spelt out programmes and activities of Congress in its regular editions and distributed them free in the rural areas so as to build up the momentum of the movement.²⁸ The *Ashram* at Pharasidinga got a face-lift with the construction of a new building around the courtyard of the *Ashram* to avoid any detection by the police about the activities of the *ashramites*. The *Sardar* of Balasore, Surendranath Das, who camped in Pharasidinga co-ordinated the CDM by giving necessary

26. AICC Papers, F.No. F.1, Mahtab to Patel, 7.12.31.

27. WWCC, ACC-61, FNR, Balasore, 9.1.32.

28. WWCC, ACC-61, FNR, 9.2.32.

directives. He published cyclostyled bulletins titled *Rana-bheri* (war-cry) from there, which exhorted people to take to the movement. The bulletins also gave extensive coverage of police brutalities in the district. People of the district secretly supplied food and clothes to the inmates of Pharasidinga *Ashram*. The wife of Mahtab, Subhadra Devi, and a few of the female relatives of the *Sardar* were arrested while secretly carrying necessary supplies to the *ashramities*.²⁹

Meanwhile, Mahtab was released from jail in July, 1932.³⁰ With his release, the movement again registered an upward swing when he engaged himself not only in the anti-untouchability movement but also got into regular touch with the underground leadership at Pharasidinga. With his release, the picketing of foreign shops picked up. It is quite interesting to note that "lithographed letters, printed and published at the Revolution Bulletin Press, signed by Subhadra Mahatab" in July were sent to police officers and Magistrates of Balasore urging upon these officials to give up their jobs and "side with Congress."³¹ Mahtab, at this time, paid special attention to the issue of untouchability. He visited many areas of the district and organised meetings on the issue. In a meeting at Bhadrak, he advocated the idea of allowing the "depressed classes" to the inner shrines.³² During October, Mahtab led a group of outcastes to his family temple in Agarpara and made them touch the idols, for which, of course, his family suffered social boycott by the orthodox Hindu elements.³³ Under his initiative, a night school for the outcastes came into function in Bonth area.³⁴

The overall Swadeshi spirit in terms of the boycott of foreign clothes and picketing of excise shops remained distinctly dominant

29. *Ibid*, 23.8.32.

30. *Ibid*, 7.7.32.

31. *Ibid*.

32. *Ibid*, 9.10.32.

33. *Ibid*, 23.10.32.

34. *Ibid*, 23.11.32.

trends of the movement throughout this phase. In Cuttack, the 'Cuttack District War Council' was founded in July under the initiative of Mahtab. The very Council sent a letter to District Magistrate, Cuttack, stating that the Council had decided to "take the offensive in the war and bring the fight to a glorious victory for the nation" and challenged "the authorities to meet the non-violent soldiers with all their brute force at command."

Accordingly, a 'raids' was organised in Cuttack *Kutchery* on 11 July. The 'raiders' occupied the chairs of the office and destroyed official papers amidst shouting of slogans.³⁵ On 18 July, another batch of 8 *Satyagrahis* entered the court of the District Magistrate and demanded that the charge of administration be handed over to them. Official records were also destroyed.³⁶ On 23 July, a group of volunteers attempted to re-occupy the already seized Congress *Ashram* at Cuttack.³⁷ The police dispersed the volunteers and in the scuffle that ensued, 11 volunteers sustained injury. The very next day also, the attempt was repeated but police arrested the volunteers.³⁸ Undeterred, new batches of *Satyagrahis* continued to picket the *Ashram* for five consecutive days. The police atrocities and large scale arrests of the volunteers were severely resented by the people of the town. A protest meeting was organised on 27 July to condemn the police action. Meanwhile, the Collector instructed the police to stop arresting the *Satyagrahis* and lifted the ban under Sec. 144 hitherto imposed in the areas near the *Ashram*. Mr. Singhasharma, the Collector who thus showed sympathy was immediately transferred from Cuttack.

Mahtab was actively organising these activities, while taking part in picketing before foreign cloth shops. The volunteers picketed the shops. But, before the commencement of picketing the shopkeepers were served with notices to stop selling foreign clothes.

35. HPD, FNR, 2nd half of July, 1932.

36. *Ibid.*

37. *Ibid.*

38. HPD, FNR, 2nd half of July, 1932.

The CDM showed signs of petering out by early 1933. The underground activities organised from Pharasidinga headquarters in Balasore slowed down with the arrest of its major leader Surendranath Das in February 1933.

However, this slow-down came to be substituted by a fair degree of hectic constructive activities in terms of anti-untouchability campaign, propagation of *khadi* and organisation of *Ashrams*. In order to inspire the youth and draw them to agitation Mahtab also gave a demonstration of his radical political views when he propagated that the people would not take any part in law-making institutions till the masses had obtained the control of administration and the alien rulers along with the landlords and capitalists swept away.³⁹ To take such messages to the masses, Mahtab revived the Gandhi *Karma Mandir* based at his village Agarpara to popularise the Congress ideals and actions.

39. *HPD, FNR*, 1st half of November 1933.

PEASANT POLITICS AND MAHTAB : 1934-39

The period following the Civil Disobedience Movement witnessed a major thrust towards the organisation of the peasants and the tribals of British Orissa as well as of the Orissan princely States. The *Satyagrahis*, once released from jail by 1933, not only devoted themselves to constructive activities but also tried to organise the peasantry and the tribals. Besides, a sizeable section of the youth who had taken part in the salt politics came under the impact of the broad left ideological sways of Nehru, the Socialists and the Communists. Some of them also came under the influence of radical policies as upheld by Subhas Chandra Bose in respect of India's struggle for freedom. Thus, the released Congress activists as well as the radical youth fanned into villages and helped form *Kisan Committees*. They also organised peasant meetings and prepared drafts regarding peasant demands. It may be mentioned here that while the organisation of peasantry for unrest was dominantly confined to the coastal tracts only, the tribal unrest was initiated in the distant hill tracts, ruled by the chiefs of the *Garjat* states.

After being released from jail, Mahtab not only put special emphasis on anti-untouchability and other Gandhian Constructive activities but also conveyed his ideas to Nehru that he along with his friends had taken a vow not to participate in law-making institutions, unless and until the grievances of the peasantry were

redressed and that exploitation by the landlords and the capitalists was challenged. Acting upon this, Mahtab organised the peasants in Balasore to secure remission of rents around the end of 1933.¹ The All India Kisan Sabha which met at Lucknow in April 1936 was attended by the PCC leaders, namely, Mahtab, Naba Krushna Choudhury, Surendranath Dwivedi, Lingaraj Mishra and Bhagirathi Mohapatra.

The interest of Nehru in peasant awakening hastened the activities of the Socialists and Communists. A Peasants' Conference was organised in Calcutta on 29 November 1936 by some eminent Communist leaders of Orissa like Sarat Patnaik and Guru Charan Patnaik. Their aim was to organise the Oriya workers of Calcutta industries with a view to linking up the working class movement there and elsewhere with the peasant movement at home. Interestingly, it was Mahtab who inaugurated that Conference.²

Under Mahtab's initiative, who was the President of the Provincial *Kisan Satyagraha*, a Peasant Conference was organised in Orissa in May, 1936 wherein peasants were exhorted not to pay *Salami* (a complementary present) to *zamindars*. The Conference also advocated the need for the formation of agricultural marketing organisations and Debt reconciliation banks.³ On 14 August, the Utkal Provincial *Kisan Sangha* appointed a sub-committee consisting of Mahtab, Nabakrushna Choudhury, Raj Krushna Bose, Lingaraj Mishra and Malati Choudhury to enquire into the grievances of the peasants and submit their report to the PCC.

It is thus noted in Mahtab's political career that during the post-Civil Disobedience phase of national movement, he developed a more radical posture against landlordism and princely feudalism in Orissa.

This policy became more pronounced with and after the

1. *HPD, FNR*, 1st half of Sept. 1933.
2. *Oriya Peasants Conference*, (Pamphlet), Interview with late Sarat Ch. Patnaik, Cuttack.
3. Mahtab, *History of Freedom Movement in Orissa*, Vol. V, pp. 23-27.

1937 general election to provincial assemblies. Presiding over a peasant meeting at Balasore in February 1937, Mahtab emphasised on the need for peasant organisations to guard against the oppression of the *Zamindars* in various areas under the latter's domination.

Presiding over a peasant conference⁴ at Bhubaneswar on 20 March, he elaborated the need for upliftment of the peasant population through village reconstruction programmes. Following his deliberation with rural activists, it was resolved to organise *Krushak Sanghas* consisting of five members in each union to educate peasants and undertake activities on village reconstruction programmes.

The policy of peasant mobilisation yielded encouraging results. After almost a month long preparation in Sambalpur, a *Kisan* Conference was inaugurated on 10 May in Jharsuguda which demanded the remission of rent, relaxation of forest restrictions, abolition of *abwabs* (miscellaneous cesses levied by the *Zamindars*) and a cut in the salaries of officials and police. Mahtab, Biswanath Das, L.N. Mishra, Bodhram Dube, Prahlad Rai Lath and B.M. Joshi, (the last two from Raipur) addressed the peasants. The Conference was conspicuous by the participation of the tribals including the *Gandas*.⁵

The Banpur Peasant Conference held in June was attended by 1500 peasants.⁶ Presided over by Mahtab and attended by such prominent Congress men as Rajkrushna Bose, Lingaraj Mishra and Godabarisha Mishra, it was decided to give stress on the need for separate identity for peasant organisations in order to "enlighten the peasants about their demands" without affecting the cause of the Congress. Mahtab vehemently criticised the attempts by a section of Congress leadership including Pandit Nilakantha Das to merge the *Krushak Sangha* under the Congress banner and described such attempts as one dictated by vested interests to enjoy certain

4. *WWCC*, ACC-36, 3.4.37, Vol. II, No. B. p-52.

5. *HPD*, *FNR*, Sambalpur, 8-5-37/23.5.37.

6. *HPD*, Report of CID, 15.6.37.

privileges. He was also critical of the *Khandayat Movement* which was organised in many parts of the province and pointed out that it was also a move by the vested interests to divide the *Krushaks* into castes or communities even though the peasant is the "one who paid rent", irrespective of social divisions.

Mahtab in his speech at Banpur peasant conference observed : "Congress had always stood by the *kisans*, the poor and the helpless and to-day, it is the biggest enemy of British imperialism . . . there is a tendency at the moment for *Krushak Sangha* working apart from Congress without being affiliated to Congress . . . This fissiparous tendency would only weaken the hands of Congress and not help *kisan* movement."⁷

Commenting on the state of affairs of *Krushak Sangha*, the *New Orissa* newspaper went on to comment : "It seems certain that the Utkal Congress Committee will wipe out *Krushak Sangha*, which were a rage recently. Nilakantha Das first raised the opposition to separate *Kisan Sabha* and at Banpur Conference, Mahtab, (President, PCC) dittoed his predecessor. This indicates that PCC has resolved against the separate identity of *Krushak Sangha*. . . the tide seems to have turned against Nabakrushna Choudhury and Malati Choudhury (the socialists) who organised the peasants of Orissa before the election. They can read into the move of Congress *Zamindars* and *Mahajans* like Mahtab, Nilakantha Das and Biswanath Das to stifle the ryots' activities, making it appear as if they are doing it in the interests of Congress".

The editor of *New Orissa*, S.B. Rath who lost election, contesting under a moderate banner of Independent Congress Party had reportedly developed difference with Das and Mahtab. But, it appears more than certain that apart from his own conviction, Mahtab's difference with Das made him endorse the Socialist line vis-a-vis *Kisan Sabha*.⁸ In any case, what is crucial to note was

7. . . *New Orissa*, 18.6.37/19.6.37.

8. . . *HPD, FNR*, Puri, 24.6.37.

the fact that Mahtab, being a top spokesman of PCC aligned himself with the left elements within the PCC.

One comes across an interesting reference to the activities of *Jubaka Sangha*⁹ (Youth Organisation) in Dudpal of Bhograi, North Balasore. The police had come over to the village to conduct the house search of a person in connection with a theft case. The person in question was the leader of the *Jubak Sangha*. In fact, the case sprang from the issue of marriage, which was arranged against the verdict of the *Sangha*. Thus, the *Sangha* extracted fines from the concerned parties to the marriage. In connection with this issue a certain widow of the village had lodged a case with the police against the *Sangha* activities. When the police conducted the house search of one of the activists of the *Sangha* in connection with the above case, they were mobbed and assaulted severely by the villagers. The villagers also took away the properties seized by the police.

This small incident, however, provoked the police for a virtual reign of terror. Villagers were severely beaten up and many male members left their homes out of fear. A police force was permanently stationed in the village and a march of armed police was conducted in nearby villages. Large scale arrests also followed. To restore confidence in the mind of the people as well as to resist police oppression, Mahtab visited the area and issued a strongly worded statement to the press saying : "...it is imperative that they (the police) should become servants of public and not their masters ... The hope is entertained that the mentality of police officers would change as a result of, especially, the Congress accepting Ministry but the present police rule of Balasore gives little indication of the regard for Departmental rules... But the people should be fearless. They should see if they have got any power under the constitutional reforms. There would be no oppression if the people be brave."¹⁰

9. *The Samaja*, 4/18.6.37, HPD, Report of S.P. 2.6.37.

10. *The Samaja*, 23.8.37.

The tribal *Kol* tenants of Sukinda estate cut down large number of sal trees in forests to clear lands for cultivation. Before the district administration took the tribals to task, Mahtab drew the attention of the Ministry; and the Congress Premier, Biswanath Das promised to undertake a "probe into the grievances of the tenants personally".¹¹

Aware of the fact that the Congress government under British Government were helpless to go ahead with popular measures such as the land reforms, Mahtab got used to explain to the people that the country had obtained only 4 *anna Swaraj* and, it is by forming Kisan Sanghas in villages to support the Congress that the people should "now work for the remaining 12 *annas*". He could feel the general apathy of the people towards the Congress Ministry because of the inadequacy of welfare measures in Tenancy Bill.¹² In that kind of situation Mahtab advised the tenants to compromise their affairs with the proprietors and wanted that proprietors should also join the *Krushak Sangha*.¹³ On an experimental basis, he took up the initiative to bring peace and amity between the landlords and tenants in the Kujanga area, following an intense phase of peasant resistance in the area. This effort resulted in withdrawals of many petitions filed by parties over several cases pending in the court.¹⁴

It is necessary here to look to the affairs of the PCC during this phase of peasant mobilisation, particularly during 1937-39 when the Congress ruled. The crisis afflicting the PCC centered around fight for Presidentship of the party between Mahtab and Nilakantha Das.¹⁵ The latter with his more pro-landlord sympathies had been successful in exerting his clout in the DCCs of Puri and Ganjam. The crisis was resolved to some extent with

11. *HPD, FNR*, Cuttack, 25.10.37.

12. *HPD, FNR*, Cuttack, Feb. 1938.

13. *HPD, FNR*, Cuttack, April, 1938

14. *HPD, FNR*, Cuttack, 11.6.38.

15. *HPD, Report of C.S.* 15.1.38, 14.4.38, 14.5.38.

Gopabandhu Choudhury (a committed Gandhite) being elected as the President of PCC in March 1938. He constituted an executive committee consisting of 4 members each from both Mahtab and Das's faction.

The PCC's fifth annual session was held at Cuttack on 21-22 May, 1938, after a gap of 9 years. In the Conference Mahtab advised the Congress Workers to utilise the general awakening of the masses towards the attainment of *Purna Swaraj* in a non-violent way and urged upon the Government to look into the criminal proceedings filed against the tenants.¹⁶

The powerful *Krushak Sangha* of Kujanga with 29 village *Sabhas* was abolished in June, and the differences between *mahajans* and tenants were amicably settled. Cases were withdrawn mutually and aggrieved persons were compensated - thanks to the efforts of Mahtab and Bhagirathi Mohapatra. The local *Zamindar*, Purna Chandra Parija got enrolled as a Congress member and convened peasant meetings. The meetings were attended by the erstwhile leaders of the 29 village *Sabhas* including Narayan Birbara Samanta.¹⁷

It is fairly clear the advocacy of the line of conciliation between landed elements and the tenants, tried by the non-socialist section of PCC, was necessitated in the context of militant position of the *Krushak Sanghas* in the Kujanga, Sukinda, Madhupur, Dharmasala and other areas of Cuttack. It is important to note here that militant peasant leader like Phani Pal was very much active in *Krushak Sangha* activities of Sukinda - Madhupur and Jenapur areas.

Besides, we come across evidences of usual campaign over no-rent and remission of rent alongwith social boycott practised against estate officials by the tenants in the estates of Balrampur, Madhupur, Pachikote, Sukinda and Chausathipara

16. HPD, Report of Spl. Branch (CID) on UPCC, 21-22 May, 1938.

17. HPD, FNR, Cuttack, 25.7.38.

around September-October, 1938. The services of barber, washerman, shopkeepers were refused to the officials of the estate.¹⁸ In fact, Baldev Lall, President of Jenapur *Krushak Sangha* was largely responsible for the introduction and use of the method of social boycott of the oppressors including the *Raja* and his servants.

However, the Socialist position of having a separate organisation for *Krushak Sangha* and its somewhat distancing from the PCC over the issue surfaced after the PCC's annual Conference in May, 1938. Mahtab and Pranakrushna Padhihary positioned themselves in opposition to the Socialist/*Krushak Sangha* campaign of anti-landlordism. It is important to note that Padhihary being basically a member of Congress Socialist Party, also distanced himself from the CSP's violent anti-landlord tirade. It was in this context, Mahtab did not approve of the activities of *Krushak Sangha* of Jenapur and thought of having counter-propaganda against the *Krushak Sangha* activities.

The PCC's overall efforts at promotion of class harmony, as pointed out earlier in the positions of Mahtab and Biswanath Das was a significant aspect of the peasant movement of the period. But, it is equally significant that this leadership was more responsive to the socialist campaign than the rightist bloc represented by Nilakantha Das. However, with the presidency of PCC, resting with Gopabandhu Choudhury, the PCC's overall exercise remained in terms of raising the mass-consciousness with a 'spirit of non-violence'.

The peasant movement in Puri initially got affected by the differences between Nilakantha Das and Mahtab. Das, hailing from Puri, had a sizeable influence on Puri DCC. However, he was constantly opposed by the Socialist forces, who tried to break away from the 'orthodox Congress fold'. During April, 1938, Mahtab toured the interiors of Pipili, Kakatpur, Nimapara and Gop

accompanied by the Socialist leaders and addressed many peasant meetings. In these meetings, he talked about the difficulties which the Ministers faced under the "existing laws to do any real good to the people."¹⁹

It is quite apparent that when the left-oriented peasant movements gradually came to limelight the more orthodox Congress Ministry as well as Congress leadership wanted a cautious approach. This resulted in contradictions characterising subsequent developments. For instance, the landlords of Bhadrak petitioned the Government "to accept revenue without any penalty or process fee" as they were facing considerable difficulties in realising rents from the tenants. They, too, pointed out that socialists were not only a 'menace' to the *Zamindars* but equally giving 'anxious time' to orthodox Congressmen as well. It went on to caution the Ministry that "sooner or later a split may be expected". Interestingly, one of the signatories to this petition was Mahtab himself.²⁰ Mahtab, who toured north Balasore in February, also voiced his concern regarding the difficulties of *Zamindars* in realising rents from the tenants. He advocated the inclusion of certain provisions in the proposed amendment of the Tenancy Act to help the collection of rent.²¹ Such efforts by Mahtab and the PCC leaders were like attempts at seeking reconciliation between landlords and the peasants.

Mahtab's tour in North Balasore as well as in other parts during February, 1939 talking about 'class harmony' and explaining Congress position vis-a-vis landlords and tenants was perhaps an effort which became a necessity in the context of not only socialist preaching but also against varied levels of popular perceptions, emerging in the backdrop of Congress Ministry and its sponsoring of tenancy bills. The piloting of the bills in the legislature, in fact, fuelled popular hopes and often attached varied meaning to the notion of *Swaraj* at popular plane. It may be said in this connection

19. *HPD, FNR*, Puri, 10.4.38.

20. *HPD, FNR*, BLs, 10.2.38.

21. *HPD, FNR*, BLs 10.2.38.

that the peasant and tribal movements in the province during 1935-39, transformed the existing peasant consciousness by evolving diverse forms of struggle and various methods of mobilisation.

The peasant movement by projecting and popularising various demands on class lines distinctly eroded the legitimacy of the landed elements. Hence, it created a climate for the radical transformation of the existing agrarian structure. The other significant aspect of the movement was that it was based on the ideology of nationalism. In the cause of mobilisation of the peasantry, not only the demands of peasants got popularised, but also the message of anti-imperialism got injected into remote and diverse areas of the province. In many cases, from Congress platforms, *Kisan Sabha* meetings were also organised.

The left wing leadership in terms of Congress Socialists and Communists exerted considerable impact on the movement. It is moreover important to observe that wherever the Socialists and the Communists backed the *Krushak Sangha*, the peasant movement was pushed to a militant pitch, and the Congress Ministry (1937-39) explored solutions not only by bringing out compromises with landed elements, but also by backing the leadership at local levels. Further, the Ministry by defending civil liberties of many radical Congress and *kisan* activists, created conditions for a progressive leap towards the final phase of the freedom movement. It is noteworthy that Mahtab's leadership vis-a-vis *Krushka Sangha* activities during this period reflected the overall Congress understanding of the *kisan* politics.

MAHTAB AND INDIVIDUAL CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE MOVEMENT

The feature which characterised the Orissa Pradesh Congress Committee, right since the installation of Congress Ministry, in the shape of a factional divide between Nilakantha-Godavarisha on the one hand and Mahtab-Biswanath on the other, further deepened in 1940. The former, more or less representing the rightist elements, secured a victory in the PCC by managing to form a coalition Ministry in November, 1941 under the captaincy of Raja of Paralakhemundi.

Curiously enough, in its bid to gain political mileage and popular image, this leadership had been associated with the Forward Bloc Movement and often maintained a position sharply critical of Gandhi and the policy of non-violence. For instance, Dibakar Patnaik, a member of Nilakantha group criticised Gandhi, rejected the waiting policy of the Congress and by August, 1941, he advised the people of Koraput to desist from *Satyagraha*.¹

In contemporary politics, this divide in PCC was also seen in terms of a caste i.e. "Brahmin vs. Karan/Khandayat (writer-warrior)", with Nilakantha representing the former and Mahtab the latter. The bitterness in the two camps was such that the periodical *Dagara* observed : "We only wish that people of

1. WWCC, ACC-30, 14.8.41, HPD, FNR, Puri, 14.4.40.

Orissa having been saved from the clutches of a tiger (referring to Nilakantha's presidency of PCC in 1939) might not fall into the clutches of the snake".²

This divide, however, ultimately resulted in the formation of the Orissa Congress Swarajist Party around October, 1940 by the Nilakantha faction.³

The revamping of PCC had, in fact, started since February with Nabakrushna Choudhury and Radhakrishna Biswas Ray being appointed President and Secretary respectively.⁴

Mahtab attended the Congress Working Committee at Wardha in August, 1940, as a special invitee. The Congress Working Committee resolved to "make the civil disobedience movement on an elevating character, something of clear, ideological significance, keeping unimpaired the basic demand of Congress for Indian independence. . ."^{4A} Back in Orissa from Wardha, Mahtab went on popularising the Congress resolutions as well as Gandhi's directives through public meetings, and pamphlets. Mahtab himself drafted an article on the possible nature of an impending movement. Besides, pamphlets containing Congress instructions to people regarding collection of war levies as well as making preparations for the possible movement in future were issued.

By April, the PCC took up the initiative for the preparation of *Satyagraha* by taking a census of active and passive volunteers.⁵ Another significant aspect of PCC's reorganisation exercise was to float four departments to monitor activities on Harijan uplift, minority issue, *khadi* and Spinning and overall propaganda efforts.

2. *The Dagar*, 1.1.40.
3. *WWCC*, ACC-30, OPAI, 26.10.40. No. 39.
4. *WWCC*, ACC-30, OPAI, Vol, V, 20.2.40.
- 4A. B. Quanungo, "Preparations for Civil Disobedience" in *Centenary History of Indian National Congress*, Vol. III, pp. 330-331.
5. *WWCC*, ACC-30, Vol. V, 6.4.40.

Mahtab headed propaganda affairs.⁶ Back from AICC session, around May, he started emphasising on stepping up the constructive programme of the Congress to enhance Congress influence.⁷ Being the President of DCC, he undertook regular tours of Balasore district with an eye to strengthen the constructive programme in the district since May, 1940.⁸ These tours were also undertaken to gauge the popular pulse for the coming *Satyagraha*. The DCC also promoted the campaign around constructive programme by distributing AICC and PCC circulars as well as articles written by Mahtab, and explaining the *Satyagraha* programme in mass meetings.⁹

Mahtab's active interest in the Balasore District Congress activities led to the expulsion of Banamali Das from Nilagiri *Prajamandal*.¹⁰ In fact, Banamali Das, by this time, had clearly emerged as a leader of Nilagiri *Prajamandal*, with tremendous faith on Communist Marxist ideology.

UPCC and DCC circulated various leaflets to popularise their view points. For example, around September, UPCC released 3 leaflets namely Congress *Nirdesha* (Instructions), Congress *Karyakarini Samiti Prastab* (Working Committee Resolutions) and Congress Committee *Istahara* (communiqué).¹¹ These leaflets essentially focussed on non-co-operation with war efforts. The communiqué released by Mahtab on behalf of the Balasore DCC advised people not to tolerate any compulsion regarding war-fund collection and to immediately inform the Congress office of such efforts. As early as January 1940, a pamphlet was issued by the Balasore DCC titled "The Oriya

6. *WWCC*, ACC-30, Vol. V, 6.5.40, No. 18.

7. *WWCC*, ACC-30, Vol. V, 6.5.40, No. 18.

8. *WWCC*, ACC-60, 28.5.40.

9. *Ibid.*

10. *WWCC*, ACC-60, 13.5.40.

11. *Board of Revenue Records*, DM's Report, 15.9.40.

"Way" to serve as a guide to the Congress activists engaged in popularising the message of the Congress and Gandhi.¹²

Mahtab was appointed as the 'General Dictator' for Orissa to monitor PCC's preparation for the *Satyagraha*.¹³ So also, 'Dictators' were appointed for other districts.

These developments suggest that, despite a disturbing divide in the PCC since the beginning of 1940, a consistent effort was on to put the PCC in all readiness for the coming *Satyagraha*. The process naturally hastened in April, with the reorganisation of the PCC and the institution of *Satyagraha* training camps both at village and district levels. The other crucial dimension was to effect a popular understanding of Gandhian constructive programme in term of *khadi*, Spinning and Harijan uplift. In fact, the Gandhian constructive programme had remained a dominant tradition of political mobilisation of PCC right since 1930 struggle.

Moreover, in October 1940, Gandhi issued a statement on the eve of starting the *Individual Satyagraha*. He pointed out :

". . . We want to tell the people of India if they will win Swaraj through non-violent means they may not cooperate militarily with Britain in the prosecution of the war. This right of preaching against participation in war is being denied to us and we have to fight against the denial. Therefore, while that right will be exercised only by those whom I may select for the purpose all other activities of the Congress will continue as before unless the Government interfere with them."^{13A}

Accordingly, Gandhi decided to initiate a limited *Satyagraha* on an individual basis by a few selected individuals in every locality. The demand of a *Satyagrahi* would be for the freedom of speech to preach against participation in the war. The *Satyagrahi* would

12. *WWCC*, ACC-30, Vol. V, 8.1.40.

13. *WWCC*, ACC-30, Vol. V, 3.10.40.

13A. B. Qanungo, "The Individual Civil Disobedience. . . op. cit, p. 406

publicly declare : "It is wrong to help British war-effort with men or money. The only worthy effort is to resist all war with non-violent resistance."^{13B}

It was in this context that the UPCC sent circulars to the DCCs regarding the new type of Gandhian *Satyagraha* (*Individual Satyagraha*) by October. The circulars, while highlighting constructive work to be taken up by Congress activists, asked only 'selected' persons to prepare for the new *Satyagraha*; and instructed the DCCs to nominate 'Dictators' in advance to conduct *Satyagraha* in view of the possibility of arrest of the leaders or the banning of the Congress.¹⁴ In this connection, Mahtab instructed the DCCs that in case the Congress was banned, the Congress activists would be released from pledges of non-violence (which they had given) and further they were at liberty to decide their individual and collective policy.¹⁵

The *Individual Satyagraha* was sought to be imparted a mass anti-war orientation by the selected *Satyagrahis*. The *Satyagrahis* would read out from the prepared text which highlighted non-violent resistance to imperialist war efforts by withholding support in terms of men and money. But, this was usually preceded and followed by detailed speeches by the *Satyagrahis*. It was impressed upon the audience that any help to war efforts was a 'sin' and that it was the 'order' of Gandhi not to help war efforts.¹⁶ The dominant leadership of PCC including Mahtab, Biswas Ray, Biswanath Das, Nabakrushna Choudhury and Nityananda Kanungo undertook the offering of *Satyagraha* on individual basis and courted arrest. The DCCs, in fact, were marked by hectic activities through the conduct of *Individual Satyagraha*.

For instance, Mahtab spoke to the people in Remuna that : "It is better to die before any preparation is made for war or even

13B. Bipan Chandra, et. al. (ed.), *India's Struggle for Independence*, p. 453.

14. WWCC, ACC-30, 26.10.70.

15. WWCC, ACC-30, V. 17.11.40.

if we die under the British rule, there was no question of considering about helping war efforts." He would repeatedly refer to "Gandhi's instructions" regarding constructive activities, non-violence and against contribution to war-funds. On the issue of war subscriptions he pointed out that Orissa had so far contributed one plane to the war but "it was nowhere as thousands of planes are being manufactured in the factories of England". Thus, he would go on to advise people : "We are poor, we can't contribute to the war efforts.¹⁶" He would also exhort people not to get worked up nor resort to violence in case any leader was arrested while making anti-war speech. The texture of the speeches by the dominant leadership points to a serious exercise on its part to keep *Satyagraha* strictly within the dictated course.¹⁷

Mahtab, however was arrested for his anti-war speech at Remuna on December 1940 and subsequently awarded one year of imprisonment. He was put in Berhampur jail this time as an 'A' class prisoner. Compared to his earlier jail experiences at Bhagalpur and Patna, the stay at Berhampur jail was more pleasant. He found ample time to re-read *Bhagabat Gita* and *Sri Chaitanyacharitamruta* and discuss the texts with fellow prisoners. He had also fair access to various newspapers. It was during this stay in the jail that he was informed of Subash Bose's escape from India. More importantly, the news of the formation of a coalition Government in Orissa under the leadership of *Raja* of Parlakhemundi, alongwith Nilakantha Das and Godabarisha Mishra reached Mahtab in the jail. He was thoroughly upset to know this development. To him, it was a sort of betrayal by a group of vested interests and an opportunist leadership to reverse the supreme doctrine of Congress on non-co-operation in the given situation. Mahtab, on being released from the Berhampur Jail in 1 December 1941 campaigned against the coalition Ministry, blamed it for being bent upon helping Japan at the cost of suppressing

16. HPD, D.M.'s Report, Ganjam, Sambalpur, Puri, 2.12.40, 4.12.40.

17. *Board of Revenue Records*, DM to chief Secretary, 2.12.40.

Congress. This was followed by Mahtab's rearrest and subsequent imprisonment for a month and half, and this act of the Orissa Government was severely criticised by top leadership of the Congress including Gandhi, Nehru and Rajendra Prasad.

The individual civil-disobedience, however, seemed to stagnate due to the Government policy of ignoring local level activists (who offered *Satyagraha*) by not arresting them but arresting only prominent leaders. This created a good deal of frustration among the arrested leaders. This trend was evident by March, 1941.¹⁸ But, PCC came up with a surprising degree of innovation as per the directive of AICC and Gandhi's scheme of "Delhi March".¹⁹ PCC, in fact, drafted an innovative scheme which asked the 'unarrested' *Satyagrihi* to serve fresh notices on the authorities about his plan to undertake a tour, from his village culminating in the capital of the province i.e. Cuttack, in between touching existing police stations and the headquarters of subdivisions. The *Satyagrihi* was thus expected to cover many villages, *en route*, where he could popularise anti-war slogans and convince people that Government had realised its mistaken policy of treating anti-war slogan as an offence and thereby resorted to the policy of no more arresting of the *Satyagrahis*. Besides, the *Satyagrahis* were instructed to make the most of their long tour from their villages to provincial capital by making anti-war speeches at selected sites like *hats*, railway stations, court compounds, townships, and temple compounds to attract large crowds. The arrest of *Satyagrahis* at such sites was meant to accord them extra public image and popularity.

Around May, the PCC launched a scheme for the recruitment of *Santi-Sena* (Peace-Army) to enrol volunteers as well as to train the intending *Satyagrahis*. The *Sena* was required to primarily supervise the maintenance of peace alongwith allied Congress activities.²⁰

18. WWCC, ACC No. 30, 15.3.40.

19. *Ibid*, 8.3.41, 19.3.41.

20. *Ibid*, 4.6.41.

For instance, Congress volunteer training corps sprung up at Gadadharpur (Bhadrak) and Aska (Ganjam) by June. The pattern of instruction in these centres focused on spinning, *Khadi*, meaning of *Satyagraha* pledge and aims and duties revolving around *Individual Satyagraha*.²¹ All these innovations by PCC can be seen as a systematic exercise to re-energise the spirit of the unarrested and disappointed *Satyagrahis* as well as to push the struggle forward in a new direction. The very strategy to re-inspire the *Satyagraha* spirit by undertaking constructive programmes and anti-imperialist political training at rural levels through the organisations of training camps as well as building up a vast contingent of *Santi-Sena* demonstrated its potential viability afterwards. This can be perceived when the entire rural setup in Orissa was swept by a vigorous anti-imperialist and anti-feudal current when the August Revolution of 1942 broke out.

However, there was no doubt that the pace of *Individual Satyagraha* slowed down by April before it was formally suspended in December 1941. This slowing down was probably compensated by shifting the *Satyagraha* in the direction of villages giving it a broad Gandhian revolutionary orientation.

21. WWCC, ACC. No. 30, 22.6.41.

QUIT INDIA AND MAHTAB

Following his arrest on December, 1940 under Defence of India Rules and subsequent imprisonment for a year, Mahtab was released from the jail on December, 1941. Soon after, he became involved in the campaign against the pro-British Coalition Ministry of Orissa. In a public meeting organised at Cuttack to celebrate the return of Mahtab and Biswanath Das, Mahtab exhorted the audience to reject the Interim Government, led by the Raja of Paralakhemundi and described the Ministers as "nothing but sycophants of British Imperialism".¹ Similarly,, in the felicitation meeting held for Mahtab at Agarpara (Bhadrak), resolutions deprecating the formation of the Coalition Ministry in the state as well as reposing full faith in the Congress was passed.² Moreover, in a press note Mahtab pointed out that, "Gandhi alone could be the saviour and no one should deviate from his teaching under any circumstances."³ Further he stated that Congress had successfully projected a new path of non-violence at a time when the very basis of world was rocked by violent forces.

Important to note that the resignation of Congress Ministry in 1939, and the arrest of top leaders during 1940-41, created the space for the ultimate installation of a Coalition Ministry with the

1. *The Samaja*, 4.12.1941.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *The Samaja*, 4.12.41.

support of less than 30 legislators in a sixty-seat Assembly. Nilakantha Das and Godabarish Mishra were instrumental for the formation of the Ministry. Despite such developments and Mahtab without being a member of the Legislative Assembly, still retained his supremacy in the Congress affairs of Orissa, and was being invited to attend the Congress Working Committee meetings to represent Orissa. After all, despite the formation of the non-Congress Coalition Ministry, Congress still retained its absolute hold on the public mind.

In the emerging context of Second World War, Orissa with its long coastline and for its proximity to Calcutta, appeared as a possible target of the Japanese Navy and precisely at a time when the latter had registered thumping military success in Malay, Singapore and Rangoon. Besides, the installation of a pro-British Coalition Government "comprising a Maharaja, a Pandit and a Maulavi" made the prevailing atmosphere confusing and panicky. Nilakantha Das had already been expelled from the Congress in August 1941. Moreover, with the release of top Congress leaders like Mahtab, Biswanath Das and Naba Krushna Choudhury, and the subsequent spearheading of anti-Coalition Ministry campaign by the leaders, the Coalition Ministry became apprehensive of a no-confidence motion on the floor of the Assembly. It was in this surcharged atmosphere, Mahtab met Gandhi, Patel and Rajendra Prasad at Bardoli. Further, he attended the Congress Working Committee meeting and All India Congress Committee meeting on 13/14/15 January 1942. The Wardha resolutions emphasised on the fact that, "only a free and independent India could be in a position to undertake the defence of the country on a national basis." Besides, it instructed the PCCs to mobilise the people in the villages and towns through constructive activities.

Back from Baradoli and Wardha, Mahtab thought of publishing a weekly journal called *Rachana* with the dominant objective of spreading Gandhian thinking. *Rachana* which was more of an Oriya version of Gandhi's *Harijan* weekly, received donation from B.M. Birla for its publication. The idea of launching

this weekly at that point of time was to counter the imperialist campaign for War and to dispel false rumours spreading fast in the province to dampen public morale in view of the war-crisis. At a time when Mahtab's brainchild and the mouthpiece of Congress, *Prajatantra* was banned, *Rachana*, to a great extent served to fill the gap.

The Congress leaders in Orissa, devoted themselves to constructive activities in order to mobilise the people at province-wide level. In fact, at this juncture the Congress was expecting the Gandhian call for subsequent Civil Disobedience Movement at any moment. It was in this context, the Coalition Ministry, in a retaliatory move, arrested some members of the Congress Legislative Party on flimsy ground of delivering anti-war speeches. Mahtab strongly criticised such a move of the minority Coalition Ministry and accused the Ministry of marginalising the strength of the Congress on the floor of the Assembly for fear of losing power.⁴

On the occasion of celebrating Independence Day on 26th January, 1942, Mahtab held extensive meeting with members of Balasore Congress Committee on the issue of revamping Congress at grassroots level. An intelligence report detailing Mahtab's instructions at this time pointed out:⁵

"From every village certain number of volunteers will be picked up and they will be asked to put in written application, to the DCC. The volunteers so recruited will be divided into sections. A section of them will always guard their respective villages and another section will be ready to move at once to the village which is troubled by unsocial elements on hearing some symbolic sound which the Congress will tell them afterwards."

Following this, Mahtab issued a statement to the Press for which he was arrested on 7 February, 1942 under the Defence of

4. *The Samaja*, 26 Jan. 1942.

5. Revenue Commissioner's Office, Collection NO. V, File No. 16 of 1942, cited in Soma Chand, *H.K. Mahtab and Freedom Struggle 1920-47*.

India Rules. Though the publication of the statement in the local papers was stopped, the press statement read:⁶

". . . Now the Congress is the only obstacle in the way of fifth columnists coming in helpful contact with the enemy when he overwhelms our country. Naturally they would like to remove this obstacle as far as they can. It is a matter for enquiry to do with that programme of removing that obstacle which is reported to have been decided upon secretly by a certain political organisation to which some of the ministerialists owe allegiance. I will not say anything more on this for it is an absolutely foolish programme. . ."

Moreover, Mahtab attacked the Ministry in no uncertain terms for trying to hold on to office with the help of British forces against all accepted norms of democracy and how the systematic arrests of prominent Congressmen were going on for some of their speeches that were delivered long ago and which were treated as "objectionable at present."

Because of this article, Mahtab was arrested and kept in Cuttack Jail alongwith Nabakrushna Choudhury, Pranakrushna Padhihary and others. The arrest of Congress leaders evoked widespread popular sympathy both in and outside the province. Gandhi described Mahtab as a 'staunch blierver in non-violence' and termed the Ministry's move as ' mean and vindictive'.⁷ Besides, Biswanath Das, leader of the Orissa Legislative Assembly and Radhakrushna Biswas Roy, President, PCC also condemned the arrest of Mahtab. Interestingly, the Balasore DCC retained Mahtab as its President, despite his absence due to the arrest. Nilambara Das was made the acting President.

All these development points to the fact that by this time, Mahtab was emerging as the unchallenged leader of the

6. Revenue Commissioner's Office, Collection No. V, File No. 16 of 1942, cited in Soma Chand, *op. Cit.*

7. Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, (CWMG), Vol. 75, p. 327. *The Samaj* 19.2.42.

Congress Party in Orissa. Perhaps, Gandhi's characterisation of Mahtab as a "staunch believer in non-violence" helped him win his indispensability for Congress movement and party in Orissa.

Mahtab, however, was released from his brief imprisonment of 25 days on 10 March. Moreover, his satisfaction was doubled after release when he received the news that Congress candidate, Uma Charan Patnaik had defeated the Coalition Ministry candidate, Sailendra Narayan Bhanja Deo, the Raja of Kanika, overwhelmingly in the bye-election of Baliguda in the Khondmal-Udayagiri Constituency of Ganjam district. Mahtab had put in his best efforts against the Coalition Ministry focusing on the latter's misdeeds and the result of the bye-election was to a considerable extent due to his campaign.

The War Scenario:

With the near-total collapse of British authority coinciding with the fall of Rangoon around March, 1942, thousands of Oriya labourers working in Burma and Rangoon returned to Orissa due to continuous air-raids in those pockets. These sections of population not only carried back home varieties of wild rumours relating to war, and Japanese victory as well as tales of horror but also added to the problem of unemployment particularly in the context of overall war-crisis. It was in this situation PCC's dominant exercise remained in terms of evolving mass preparedness by taking up constructive activities and propagating Gandhian values. Mira Ben's visit was part of that exercise.

Towards the end of February, the Congress leaders started to organise volunteer corps in different parts of the Province. In Balasore, under the overall supervision of Mahtab, volunteers from every village were raised and upon their sending written applications to Balasore DCC, the latter registered their names. The volunteers were divided into various sections. They were asked to guard their respective villages and another section was kept ready to move into the village on the indication of a 'symbolic sound' if that village got troubled by anti-social elements in the context of civil disorder

due to war. It was also decided to open up a full-fledged office at Balasore to monitor such activities, and subscriptions raised from businessmen and willing citizens to finance the scheme. This trend of raising volunteer groups became much easier, given the fact that substantive part of PCC's exercise in the year 1941 had been devoted to constructive activities in villages, raising of *Shanti Sena* and also organisation of youth leagues.

Moreover, Mahtab divided Balasore district into four zones, each under a separate Congress worker who visited all the villages and localities in the zone. He was greatly helped in this regard by Nilambara Das, Md. Haniff, Karunakar Panigrahi, Guru Charan Das, Sardar Surendranath Das and Rabindra Mohan Das.

Mahtab, at this point of time, urged the Government to create a climate by which people would not panic because of the spread of war-related rumours. He also suggested to the Government not only to see that the enemy did not get any help, but also to see that the common people did not suffer unnecessarily.⁸

Because of his criticism of certain measures undertaken by the Government by way of war time restrictions which caused immense hardship to the people and created a sense of overwhelming insecurity, Mahtab was sentenced to pay a fine of one hundred rupees or face four months imprisonment.

It was in this context, Mahtab got in touch with Gandhi and detailed him about the general sense of insecurity prevailing in the province and sought for latter's advice. In response, Gandhi sent Mira Ben as his emissary to Orissa to undertake a tour and explain to the Congress activists as well as people at large about Gandhi's future course of action. Mira Ben's presence was like a source of encouragement to the people to wait with courage and confidence. Mahtab accompanied Mira Ben in the latter's tour of Orissa. Mira Ben addressed several public meetings at Cuttack, Puri, Berhampur and Bhadrak.

8. *The Samaja*, 15.4.1942.

In the first week of July, both Mira Ben and Mahtab proceeded to Wardha to attend the Congress Working Committee in connection with the preparation of a draft for the ensuing movement. It was there that they detailed Gandhi about the nature of mass preparedness for any possible anti-British Movement in Orissa. That such reports collected by Gandhian representatives from all over India helped Gandhi to be decisive in his resolve to start the movement forthwith is aptly summed up in a secret report. The report pointed out :

"... On being asked by Dr. Sayed Mahmood whether his contemplated movement would be started all over the country simultaneously or in some specified area, Gandhi replied that he was thinking of starting the movement in specified areas such as Bardoli in Gujarat, places in Bihar as selected by Rajendra Babu, in the United Provinces as recommended by Nehru and in Orissa as proposed by Mira Ben. The remaining members of the Working Committee and the invitees, Kripalani, Rajendra Prasad, Sarojini Naidu, P. Sitaramayya, Abdul Gaffar Khan and Mahtab said that they agreed whatever Gandhi decided."⁹

During the course of Working Committee meeting, Mahtab expressed his concern regarding the possibility of non-Congress organisations resorting to violent activities. Infact, as one of the reports points out : "... Mahtab is one of Gandhi's closest followers and in referring to Gandhi's determination to stir up the masses through their abject poverty and utter helplessness to a sense of necessity of overthrowing the British power, he is said to have told Gandhi that while such a sense of necessity might be brought about by the Congress through non-violent methods, the Forward Blocists may in all probability take advantage of the situation so eagerly awaited and give finishing touch to it which may be of a revolutionary

9. Secret Evidence Part 1-37 (Extracts from a source report in the meeting of the Congress Committee held at Wardha in July, 1942), cited in P.N. Chopra : *Quit India Movement, British Secret Report*, P. 54

character."¹⁰ Moreover, looking at the style of functioning of Gandhi during this important and historic session of Congress, Mahtab observed : "his soul burnt like a live charcoal."¹¹ This expression of Mahtab showing Gandhi's sentiment has been explained elsewhere brilliantly as, "he was prepared for the worst sort of repression by the government, he did not mind if Jallianwala Baghs were created throughout the country."¹²

The discussion at Wardha continued till 14 July and finally the draft was approved to be placed in the next Congress Working Committee meeting at Bombay on 4 August, to be followed by All India Congress Committee meeting on 7 August. Neatly capturing the overall atmosphere in which the discussion all through was carried out in Wardha, a report noted :¹³ "Gandhi's closest followers showed their devotion to him even more clearly in this movement and outstanding examples are Rajendra Prasad, Vallabhbhai Patel, H.K. Mahtab, and Shankararao Deo. They all spoke in Gandhi's language and they could have been in no more doubt of what was likely to happen than Gandhi himself." Back in Orissa, Mahtab concentrated on giving final touch to the organisational activities in view of the future movement apart from popularising the Wardha resolution among the Congress leaders and activists of the Province. An intelligence report detailing the activities of Mahtab during this period pointed out,¹⁴ "Mahtab has come back from Wardha. It appears from a conversation with him that the movement contemplated by Gandhi will start soon . . . Mahtab further explained how Gandhian Volunteers had been collected in all the provinces to give a start to the movement when the call came from the leader and for this purpose all the Provincial Congress Committees were in touch with Wardha through special messengers.¹⁵

10. Quoted in P.N. Chopra, *Op. Cit.*, Wickenden's Report, Para-28.

11. *Sadhanara Pathe*, p. 234.

12. P.N. Chopra, *Op. Cit.*, p. 54.

13. Quoted P.N. Chopra, *Op. Cit.*, Wickenden's Report, Para-31.

14. P.N. Chopra, *Op. Cit.*, P. 303, Supplementary Evidence 33, (Extract from the CID, Cuttack Report No. Dr/CA. 42 (20.7.42).

15. *Ibid*, P. 242, Secret Evidence, Part 1-56, 20.7.42.

During this period, an interesting incident occurred. Mahtab had the opportunity to come across a top confidential government letter which revealed the British motive of taking intense repressive measure to crush the ensuing Congress Movement. The letter also talked about the psychological fear of the Indians towards state-sponsored repression and hence the justification for such counter measures by the Government from the very start of the movement.

Two persons named Bhupendra Kumar Basu and Anil Kumar Ghose claimed that they had handed over that letter to Mahtab. As per Basu's version, this top original confidential letter, straight from London Office, reached his hand and he afterwards gave it to Mahtab. As Basu says, Mahtab congratulated him for this action for he believed that such activities would help India attain Independence.¹⁶

However, Ghose suggests that on the eve of Quit India Movement, British Government issued a secret instruction called 'Puckle's Circular' to all State Governments instructing the latter to crush the movement and Ghose had stolen it from District Magistrate's Office at Cuttack under great risk. Later on, he gave the circular to Mahtab, who, in turn handed it over to Gandhi at Bombay.¹⁷

After going through the circular, Gandhi reacted sharply and noted with anger :

"I have had the good fortune to have friends who have supplied me titbits of national importance such as Sir Fredrick Puckle's very interesting production and that of his lieutenant Sri D.C. Das (the District Magistrate of Cuttack). It is good for the public to know to what lengths the Government can go in their attempts to suppress national movements. . . .

16. B.K. Basu, 'My Close Friend Dr. Mahtab in *Mahtab-Orissa* (Cuttack, 1979), pp-76-81.

17. A.K. Ghose, 'Some Reflections' in *Mahtab-Orissa*, Cuttack, 1978, pp.45-51.

... "Meanwhile, let the public know that these circulars are an additional reason for the cry of 'Quit India'... Let the Dases know that there are many other ways of earning a living than betraying national interest. . ."¹⁸

Mahtab went to Bombay and attended the Congress Working Committee meeting on 4-6 August 1942. On 7-8 August All India Congress Committee in its historic meeting, finalised the 'Quit India' draft proposal. Along with Mahtab, Radhakrushna Biswas Ray, Surendranath Dwivedi, Malati Devi also attended the meeting. On 8 August, 'Quit India' Resolution along with the Gandhian call of 'Do or Die' was passed. But, on 9 August all the members of the Congress Working Committee were arrested. Mahtab along with Nehru, Patel, Govinda Ballabh Pant, Pattabhi Sitaramayya, Kripalani, Asaf Ali, Dr. Prafulla Ghosh, Sayed Mahmood, Narendra Dev, Shankararo Deo were put into the Ahmednagar Fort Jail.

Commenting on the Congress leaders who were jailed inside Ahmednagar Fort Jail, Nehru wrote in his *Discovery of India*, "they were an interestingly cross-section of India and represented in their several ways not only politics but Indian scholarship, old and new".¹⁹

Further, reflecting on the jail life, Sitarammaya interestingly puts it :²⁰

"We kill time between eating and preparing to eat; falling ill and recovering and falling ill again,... reading, writing and forgetting; discussing and declaiming, befriending the official and alienating; .. beguiling the evenings with badminton that engages five players and seven spectators - some of the latter moving and others stationary, some watching from near and some from afar. . .

18. *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (CWMG), Vol. 76, Introduction to Government Secret Circular, pp. 373-374.

19. J. Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, p.9

20. P. Sitarammaya, *Feathers and Stones*, p. 201, Bombay, 1946.

"Badminton has fallen on bad times. Jawahar, Kripalani, Azad have pains in forearms. Shankarrao has developed coccygeal pain. Mahtab has struck as a protest against inability to serve the shuttlecock..."

Further commenting on Mahtab, Sittarammaya observes,²¹ "Mahtab had quietly dropped from the Badminton court, where he was playing very well (his height in his favour), but somewhere in service the shuttle would not obey the bat and he got tired of learning 'service' and more than that of being taught, let alone by players who had the right and qualification to do so, but non-players as well."

Further he notes :

". . . Vallabhbhai did his three-mile walk with unfailing regularity. Only Mahtab had come to beat him though he had his own methods - tall, well-built, brought up in opulence . . . he carried his frame with becoming dignity as well as grace." Yet in another passage, he points out,²² "Faqr-i-Utkal, as he was familiarly called, with his cultured interest least suspected in his big burly frame, he combined with his serious political activities, his old experience of the Bihar Legislative Council, his new interest in the affairs of the Eastern Agency States, his intimate touch with Subhash Babu of pre-presidential and post-presidential days and his unfailing loyalty to Gandhi".

Mahtab's interest in flute-playing constituted another relaxing constituent of the jail life. As Sittarammaya remembers, "with radio music inside, the aridity of life was somewhat relieved".²³

Mahtab himself talks about a particular incident relating to his jail life. One day, Nehru and Mahtab were taking Kripalani and Shankarrao in a challenging doubles badminton match in which the former lost to the latter. Feeling seriously hurt after being

21. *Ibid.* p. 47.

22. *Ibid.* p. 31.

23. *Ibid.* p. 40.

defeated, Nehru put the entire blame on Mahtab. After that incident, Mahtab stopped playing badminton. However, few days after, Nehru again forced Mahtab to join him in the badminton court.²⁴

Mahtab regarded his jail life at Ahmednagar Fort from August 1942 to April 1945 as one of the best phases of his life. This was precisely because this particular phase made him regulate his life with utmost discipline as a student prepares for his future with rules and regulations in an organised school. The jail life with its usual routine of reading, writing, playing games, gardening and intense physical labour helped to awaken the inner spirit of the self - a fact which all the inmates of the jail had tremendously realised. During this time, Mahtab devoted himself to the learning of Sanskrit regularly for two years, under the guidance of Acharya Narendra Dev. That apart, he utilised this phase for writing 'Orissa History' in two volumes, over a period of two and half years.

Besides, he also wrote three novels, small pieces of poems and a prosody during this period. He also used to spend an hour every Sunday for stitching and binding books as well as preparing calender. In fact, he enjoyed reading extensively in the library. Nehru used to get quite a good amount of books from different countries in the shape of gifts. This gave Mahtab an opportunity to browse through those books. Reflecting on the personality of the jail mates, Sitarammya very interestingly observes:²⁵

"Maulana by position is the foremost citizen of this abode Vallabha the most wise, Jawaharlal the most active, Dr. Sayed Mahmood the most sedate, Asaf Ali the most contemplative, Pandit Pant the most astute, Dr. Ghosh the most scientific, Shankarrao Deo the most serviceable, Kripalini the most professionalist, Narendra Dev the most scholarly, and Mahtab the most artistic.

". . . Thus have we spent nearly a thousand days. We have

24. *Sadhanar Pathe*, p. 241.

25. P. Sitaramaya, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 391-392

all lived together - only to respect one another better. Not once did it occur to us that X is a Muslim, Y is a Hindu or such. . ."

Finally, the prisoners of Ahmednagar Fort were transferred to provincial jails by the end of March, 1945, after a gap of two and half years. Accordingly, Mahtab was shifted to Sambalpur Jail and spent about a month there and finally released in May, 1945.

After being released from Sambalpur Jail, Mahtab got into touch with Nabakrushna Choudhury, Biju Patnaik and all of them got together to chalk out the plan for setting up a Textile Plant at Choudwar. Moreover, they had thought of utilising the underground rooms of the plant for "training young men in armed struggle and for storing equipments". Thus initially, Mahtab, Nabakrushna Choudhury and one Mr. Das of Kishore Transport contributed an amount of Rs. 1000/- each and started organising the plant at Choudwar. Biju Patnaik remained its proprietor.²⁶

26. Cited in *Soma Chand, Op. Cit.* 126

BUILDER OF "MODERN ORISSA"

1945-50

After being released from Jail in 1945, Mahtab spent sometime with Gandhi in Panchagani to ascertain the latter's views about the future course of action. Gandhi advised him to exert his utmost in the interest of the country during the period of transition in which the nation was placed. He advised him to meet Sir Hawthorn Lewis, the Governor of Orissa, who in Gandhi's opinion, was an impartial officer and had served as the S.D.O. of Buxar during the Champaran Satyagraha. When Mahtab called on Lewis, the latter advised him to get himself first acquainted with the fundamentals of administration since the British were about to leave India.

Towards the end of 1945, the British Government declared its intention of holding provincial elections and started negotiating with various political parties for effecting the transfer of power. In this context, the Viceroy Lord Wavell invited the Congress leaders to participate in the discussion and it was precisely at this juncture of time that the onus of leading the Congress Government in Orissa fell on the shoulders of Mahtab. The chances of two other prominent leaders like Nilakantha Das and Godabarisha Mishra to lead the Congress in Orissa got ruled out for their participation in the coalition government during the war period. Similarly, Biswanath Das, who had headed the Congress Government in 1937 was pushed out of the race for leadership owing to a supposed 'guilt' under the Electoral Corrupt Practice Act. In fact, Das was the election agent of

Umacharan Patnaik who contested the bye-election of Baliguda (Ganjam) against the *Raja* of Kanika. The latter lost the election against the Congress candidate but filed a case against Uma Charan Patnaik and Biswanath Das on the ground that the Congress candidate had submitted false accounts of electoral expenditure. Accordingly, the Government had given the verdict that both Das and Patnaik would be debarred from the election for 6 years. Following these developments, Mahtab and Das met Gandhi in Pune. Gandhi's advice was that Mahtab should take up the leadership of the Orissa Congress and give election campaigning top priority. The former chalked out a sound electoral strategy to ensure a comfortable victory for the Congress in Orissa by diplomatically winning over the known opponents of the Congress such as *Raja* of Khallikote, *Raja* of Kanika and Godavarisha Mishra. Under pre-election adjustment the *Raja* of Khallikote was nominated to the central legislature and no Congress candidate contested from Kanika, thus allowing an independent member representing the Kanika landlord to contest. Similarly, Mahtab succeeded in bringing the fast of Godabarisha Mishra who had been considerably defamed for his alleged corruption during Coalition Ministry, to an end and thus securing the latter's support for Congress - Ministry. In the election, Congress achieved a resounding victory, winning 48 out of a total 56 seats in which 37 had won without any contest. Sardar Patel congratulated Mahtab for such a great victory for the party.

In 1946, Cabinet Mission visited India. Mahtab submitted a memorandum to the mission on behalf of Orissa Congress regarding the problems of *garjat* states and the issue of their merger to British India. In fact, Mahtab had been advised by Gandhi and Azad to take up the issue with Stafford Cripps. Cripps offered no concrete assurance but advised Mahtab to try out all sorts of strategies to win over the princely states. Cripps however, was emphatic about the consent of the Muslim League as a must for any political settlement.

An astute diplomat, Mahtab could easily gauge the depth of commitment of Cripps to Jinnah's 'Two Nations Theory.' On his part, therefore he proposed that the 'two nations' should first agree upon to accept Defence, External Affairs, and Currency system as common subjects. Maulana Azad too was prepared to support this idea. In fact, Cripps sent two draft proposals through Mahtab for the consideration of the Congress leadership. Mahtab had shown the drafts to Gandhi and Azad. But it was due to Nehru's firm opposition to the proposal, the idea was dropped. Further, Cripps had instructed Mr. Corfield, Secretary, Political Department to meet Mahtab and chalk out some "co-operative scheme" on the question of merger of princely states. Realising that the Cripps proposal could hardly be accepted, Mahtab wrote to George Blaker, the Private Secretary to Stafford Cripps that by lingering discussion and by collecting views of different political parties and individuals, the Cabinet Mission had only served to widen the difference of opinion amongst various political circles.

After his disillusionment with the Cabinet Mission, Mahtab rushed back to Orissa to take over the responsibility of provincial Congress Government. The Ministry led by Mahtab took oath on 23 April 1946. The Congress Ministry consisted of four other prominent leaders of Orissa such as Nabakrushna Choudhury, Nityananda Kanungo, Pandit Lingaraj Mishra and Radhakrishna Biswas Ray. In his maiden speech, after taking over the reins of Congress Government in Orissa, Mahtab spelt out the perspective of the Congress Government very clearly. He observed : "The independence of the country no more appears like a star in the distant horizon. *Swaraj* will be achieved in this year. If we are able to redress the grievances of the people, then only the real value of independence will be realised. I assure the officials that the Ministers are not the enemy of theirs. In fact, Government servants are the eyes, ears, hands and legs of any administration. Without them, no programme can be implemented. Our job is to unite the Government servants and the people so that the Government servants will not think themselves as the masters of

the people but as the servants of the people. The Government officials do not have to fear anything but they should work keeping in mind the interests of the masses, those who have elected us to form the Government". These views of Mahtab were intended to dispel the growing apprehension on the part of the Government officials that the Congress Government would take revenge on them for their anti-movement stand in the past.

Meanwhile, communal tension flared up in a few urban areas of Orissa like Bhadrak and Cuttack following the Nohakhali incident, where Hindus had been killed. Mahtab handled the issue quite tactfully. In Bhadrak, police had to open fire on a procession of the Muslims leading to the killing of two Muslims. To handle the situation he immediately ordered for judicial enquiry. Similarly, in Cuttack when the plan was afoot to celebrate the Nohakhali day and the Hindus were allegedly instigated to kill Muslims, Mahtab took personal care to ensure that no violence took place while taking out the processions of the Hindus to celebrate the day. On the very day of celebration, he himself volunteered to address a largely attended public meeting. In the meeting he exhorted : "people should go to Nohakhali in hundreds as volunteers to console the Hindu brethren or to take revenge on the exploiters; but there is no scope in Orissa to take revenge for the mistakes done in Nohakhali." In fact, contrary to the advice of the District Magistrate, Mr. Ramnathan, Mahtab had lifted the ban on procession and the imposition of 144 Cr. P.C. for the celebration of Nohakhali Day in Cuttack. Thereby, he could succeed in pacifying the Hindu sentiments and controlling the communal tension from getting further aggravated.

It was in this context, Mahtab received a letter of invitation from Wavell to join the Interim Government. There was widespread popular demand in Orissa that Mahtab should join the Interim Government. But, Azad and Patel insisted that Mahtab should refuse to join the Interim Government as he had to lead the Congress Government in Orissa. In fact, leaders like Biswanath Das and

Nabakrushna Choudhury persuaded Mahtab to join the Government at the Centre so that the issue of merger of princely states could be taken up more positively. But Patel assured Mahtab that without going to the Centre he could still put pressure on the Centre over this issue. On the basis of this assurance, Mahtab wrote back to Viceroy stating his inability to join the Government. However, Mahtab was selected by the Congress High Command to represent Orissa in the Constituent Assembly.^(A)

The Mahtab Ministry had three major achievements - (a) the Hirakud Dam Project on the river Mahanadi, (b) the creation of new capital of Orissa in Bhubaneswar, (c) and finally the most crucial one, the merger of princely states into Orissa Province.

In fact, the Damodar River Valley Project which was undertaken by the British Government right sine 1944, inspired Mahtab to conceive of the Mahanadi River Valley Project. Even while in jail during 1944, Mahtab started persuading Thakkar Bapa, the Gandhian social activist who was committed to the cause of Orissa to take up the issue of the Mahanadi River Valley Project in the line of the Damodar River Project. Thakkar Bapa had consequently done some campaigning by focusing the issue on the press since then. Once released from jail in 1945, Mahtab took up the issue far more vigorously. He held discussions with Ambedkar, A.N. Khosla (the then Chief Engineer of Government of India) and Sir Hathrone Lewis (the Governor of Orissa). Finally in 1945, the foundation stone for the Project was laid in Hirakud of Sambalpur. However, the Congress Ministry had to face a stiff opposition once the survey work started for the Project in Sambalpur. The anti-Hirakud Dam Movement picked up in 1946 at a time when Mahtab was yet to consolidate the Congress Government. The preliminary survey work of the Project which began in Sambalpur in 1946 sought to acquire more than one hundred villages. This naturally created large scale resentment and popular protest. The peasants

of these areas could hardly reconcile to the shocking reality of losing lands despite attractive compensation packages. The issue of Hirakud Dam offered the right opportunity to some of the *garjat*-rulers of Orissa to reassert their political position by taking advantage of the resentment of the people of Sambalpur against the dam. Alleging that the *Maharaja* of Patna sponsoring such a movement, Mahtab wrote to the then Governor, C.M. Trivedi (12 Oct, 1946). "I am getting information that the *Maharaja* of Patna is organising and directly conducting the agitation against the Hirakud Project at Sambalpur. His ultimate aim is to amalgamate Sambalpur in his Patna State. He is dreaming of the old Days of Patna of 16th Century".

The *Maharaja* of Patna who was against the merger of the Orissa States in the British Orissa attempted to re-organise the princes under a reactionary platform called "Eastern State Federation". Moreover, Mr. Bodhram Dubey who was refused a ministerial berth in Mahtab's Ministry also took up this anti-Hirakud Dam Campaign seriously. Dubey met Kripalani (President, Indian National Congress) and propagated that the Congress President had ordered for the organisation of *Satyagraha* against the Hirakud Dam. However, Kripalani denied having issued any such permission later on. The Congress Ministry put down the agitation with a firm determination despite widespread campaigning against the project. The agitation became so intense that Gandhi had to make an appeal to the *garjat* rulers not to back such potentially anti-national movement. Being an extensive Multi-purpose National Project, the Hirakud Dam intended to control the floods in Mahanadi in order to save the coastal settlements in the Mahanadi delta, especially Cuttack, and equally threatening the submergence of large tracts of cultivable lands and villages of Sambalpur regions. The *garjat* rulers backing the movement raised the bogey of step-motherly attitude of the Orissa Government towards the peasants of Sambalpur who were to abandon their ancestral properties, lands etc. in the interest of the coastal people. Thus, the sentiment of sub-regionalism was whipped up through the anti-Hirakud

Movement. Local-*gauntias* or land owners, paid workers and the intelligentsia of Sambalpur district spearheaded the Movement. The Congress Government came to be popularly perceived as the *Kattaki Sarkar* (the Government of Cuttack) and its leadership as *Kattaki*. It was in this context, a political party patronised by the ex-ruler of Patna, R.N. Singh Deo named as "Kosalatkala Praja Parishad" was floated. It stood for the division of Orissa and creation of the States' Union.

Mahtab and Nabakrushna Choudhury undertook massive tour of the district and explained to the people about the rationale and justification of the dam thereby trying to organise public opinion in favour of the dam. Mahtab also made it a point to see that immediate Governmental compensation were given to the affected people in Sambalpur. Finally the Movement subsided. Thus a determined Mahtab could successfully project himself as a person belonging to and concerned about the larger interests of the state.

Similarly under Mahtab's initiatives, the Orissa Government along with the *Maharaja* of Jeypore entered into an agreement with the Madras Government for development of hydro-electric power at Dumduma falls on the Machkund river. This agreement evoked resistance of the people who considered the stipulation of apportioning seventy percent of the ultimate power developed at Dumduma to Madras for ninetynine years as a virtual sell-out of Orissa's interest. People in Koraput resisted the move to acquire lands for the project. Mahtab in his attempts to establish a Central Rice Research Institute at Cuttack as well as Thermal Plant at Choudwar by acquiring lands had also to face popular protest.

The *Samaja*, the largest-selling popular daily of Orissa championed the cause of resistance to the welfare projects initiated by Mahtab. Realising the need for modernisation of Orissa at the earliest and the transformation of popular consciousness in Orissa, Mahtab thought of reviving his old newspaper *The Prajatantra* in 1947 from Cuttack which had till then stopped its

publication. The *Prajatantra* in fact came to stand for modern values and the very process of modernisation of Orissa's economy. Till 1950, Mahtab personally penned the editorial for the *Prajatantra* and himself articulated the political views of the newspaper. Mahtab's belief that progressive literature can bring an all out development of Orissa led to the incorporation of supplements on women and children such as *Narijagat* and *Meena Bazar* in the *Prajatantra* to cater to the literary needs of women and children of the society.

In the meantime, Mountbatten took over the charge of Viceroy of India and the Interim Government led by Congress and Muslim League started functioning since Sept. 1946. Under this Interim Government an Executive Council was formed with Nehru as the Vice-President. During this phase, Mahtab met the different members of the Executive Council to appraise them of the pressing needs of Orissa. The most important set of demands which Mahtab placed before the Council was as follows:-

- (a) Industrialisation of Orissa with the immediate provision for the establishment of Steel, Cloth and Salt factories.
- (b) Financial Assistance by the Centre for Hirakud Multi-Purpose Project as well as for the development of new capital at Bhubaneswar.
- (c) Setting up of Radio Station at Cuttack.
- (d) Restarting of the provision for recruitment of Oriyas as soldiers in the Army, a practice which had been stopped in Orissa since the days of *Paika* rebellion.

Mahtab was emphatic in his plea before the Viceroy as well as the Executive Council that Orissa deserved special assistance and attention because of the negligible welfare measures taken up during the 150 years of Colonial rule. He pleaded that compared to the investment which had gone into the making of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras, Orissa had got very little and the wrongs needed to be corrected before the British left India.

It was due to such efforts that the establishment of Orissa Textile Mill at Choudwar took off and policy decision was made for setting up a steel plant by the-then Congress Government. Besides, the Radio station was also set up at Cuttack in 1948.

However, one of the most important achievements of Mahtab was the creation of the modern capital of Orissa at Bhubaneswar. The proposal for having the state capital at Bhubaneswar was approved in the Assembly in September 30, 1946. The idea of having the capital at Bhubaneswar took shape when the American soldiers in their attempt to establish an aerodrome, located the very site in the jungle of Bhubaneswar. They cleared the jungle and built the aerodrome there. Mahtab had realised that Bhubaneswar was the right choice to become the State Capital. Moreover, Bhubaneswar carried a special emotional appeal in so far as it had the living evidence of the chronological history since the days of Ashok's Kalinga war. Despite stiff opposition to the move for shifting the capital from Cuttack to Bhubaneswar and ruling out the proposals for such alternative sites at Choudwar, Khurda and Rangeilunda of Berhampur, Mahtab chose to establish the capital at Bhubaneswar. He had to convince the then Finance Member of the Executive Council to release the central financial grant to meet the cost of expenditure for building the Capital. Similarly, as the Central Government was not in a position to bear the huge cost of 50 crores for the multi-purpose Hirakud Project, Mahtab prevailed upon the Centre to agree to advance a loan assistance for the Project. Side by side, he could convince the Government of India to establish a cement factory in Orissa to supply cement for the project at a subsidised rate. The initiative for the establishment of a cement factory was taken up by the Dalmiyas.

More importantly, in order to modernise the administration and to ensure the intellectual and technological development of the State, he revamped the prevailing institutional set up of Orissa considerably by inducting new blood into the system in terms of bringing qualified surgeons, intellectuals, engineers from outside

the state. He also created necessary facilities in terms of loans and stipends to encourage Oriya intelligentsia to go abroad for higher studies. In this regard, he invited contributions from the industrialists like the Tatas.

Mahtab who undertook the responsibility of leading the Congress Government during the critical period of transfer of power was committed to build up a socially and economically vibrant Orissa. He was singularly determined to achieve his goal, a process which he often described as the "Double March". The concept of "Double March" for Mahtab implied that, he had to be at the forefront of the national politics at a time when India was inching towards independence. At the same time he endeavoured to accelerate Orissa's developmental process which had till then been neglected by the colonial rulers and thus remained backward compared to other provinces. The ultimate objective was to place the society and economy of Orissa on a solid footing.

The most significant achievement of Mahtab during this phase was his successful attempt at the merger of princely states with the Orissa Province. Mahtab had been pleading for the merger of the 26 Native States with the 'British Orissa' in the common interest of people of both the areas right since he was appointed as the Chairman of the Non-official Enquiry Committee to conduct enquiry into the affairs of Orissa State.

The said Enquiry Committee in its report published in 1939, had observed that :"In view of the inherent inability of the Orissa States to support popular enlightened administration within their area and in view of the inevitability of a strong and irresistible popular demand from the people of these states for rights of self-Government and self-determination, the *Sanads* granted to the Rulers of the states by the paramount power should be cancelled and they may be treated as landlords of permanently settled estates such as Aul, Kujanga and Kanika. That this could be done without doing any violence to the rights of these chiefs will be clear from a perusal and examination of their original states. The acceptance

of this recommendation will bring these states under the jurisdiction of autonomous provinces and the people concerned will be enabled to join hands with their brethren in the province of Orissa in their attempts to solve the problems common to them all".

Mahtab also pressed the issue before the Cabinet Mission by pointing out that both the Native States and the Orissa Province were part of one single geographical, political, economic, historical and linguistic unit and hence the states should be amalgamated with the province. He also drew the attention of the Mission to the recommendation of the Attlee Committee which had recommended that the Orissa Feudatory States should be brought into relationship with any administrative set up for Orissa. Immediately after assuming the Office of Premier on 23 April, 1946, Mahtab issued two circulars to all the Rulers of Orissa States and sought their co-operation for the merger of the States with the province. He reiterated his stand on the issue of merger when he met the Rulers of Orissa States led by the Ruler of Saraikalla at Sambalpur on 16 October, 1946.

In the meeting Mahtab emphatically pointed out :"So far as Orissa is concerned, considering its geographical, linguistic and ethnological affinity with the states, it is desirable that there should be one administration for both the states and the province; otherwise both the province and the states can have no efficient planning in the absence of which each part will be weak in comparison with the other provinces of India". However, the rulers of the Orissa states instead floated the idea of having a platform in the name of 'Eastern States Federation' alongwith the Chhattisgarh States. The Eastern States Federation took its birth on 1 August 1947 under the active leadership of R.N. Singh Deo, the Maharaja of Patna. It also prepared a comprehensive constitution. Financed by the federating states and having an Eastern States Joint Police Force, the federation was envisaged to be a much stronger Union than the merger of the States with the Orissa Province. Moreover, the Maharaja of Patna had propounded a theory that the Orissa

States and the present district of Sambalpur were not parts of Orissa but once upon a time these areas formed the so-called Koshala territory. Thus the rulers of the states made desperate bids to forge a union to retain their *status quo* in the face of vigorous popular demand for democratic Governments in the states around a time when independence of the country looked imminent.

The rulers carried on large-scale campaigning through songs, folk dances and lavish distribution of money to obtain popular support to actualise the plan for Eastern States Federation. The Raja of Patna, manipulated the issue of Hirakud Dam Project to spread sub-regionalism by championing the so-called interests of Sambalpur vis-a-vis the coastal Orissa. Underlying his efforts was the objective to win over large scale popular support for the idea of Eastern States Federation. The rulers also floated a political party called 'Kosalatkala Praja Parishad' which espoused the cause of the division of Orissa and the creation of the Eastern States Federation.

In the meantime, with the lapse of paramountcy as per the Indian Independence Act of 1947, a new "States Department" was created on 27 June, 1947 to substitute the hitherto existing Political Department, which dealt with the matters concerning princely states. The States Department was headed by Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel with V.P. Menon as the Secretary to conduct the relations between the states and the province in matters of common concern. It was at such juncture of time under the constant persuasions of Mahtab, Patel took a determined stand to arrest the process of 'balkanisation' of India which looked like almost a reality due to the insistence of the rulers of the states to keep away from the Indian Union.

Mahtab submitted a memorandum to Patel depicting the nature of administrative difficulties obtaining due to the interlacing of the states with the territories of Orissa concerning law and order, smuggling across the borders, the administration of controls, especially in regard to food, and the development of communication and river valley projects. He suggested to remove

these difficulties both in the States and Provinces by developing a mechanism for the common administration of certain subjects such as communication, education, public health, provincial police, administration of justice, excise, forest and planning of agriculture and industry and such items which could be incorporated to the list by mutual agreement.

While the strategy of constitutional options were being tried out to have a peaceful solution to the merger issue, the *Prajamandal* agitation revived in certain states reiterating the demand for the establishment of responsible Government and the merger of the states with the province of Orissa. Especially, the popular movement in Nilgiri assumed serious proportions. The Nilgiri *Prajamandal* which carried out the movement in order to secure a responsible Government went ahead with the objective of setting-up an "Azad Nilgri Government". The *Prajamandal* issued the call for large scale social boycott and picketing in order to paralyse the state administration. To counteract the popular movement, the *Raj Durbar* actively encouraged a group of armed tribals who indulged in violent activities including setting fire to the house of *Prajamandal* leaders and the looting of paddy from the fields. Even the *Raja* utilised the service of the Eastern States Joint Police Force to counteract the *Prajamandal* Movement.

The impact of near-total anarchy prevailing in Nilgiri was felt in the neighbouring district of Balasore. Mahtab pressed the Government of India for stern military action against the state. The Dominion Government in response, authorised the Government of Orissa on 8 Nov. 1947 to take over the administration of Nilgiri. Patel though convinced about the necessity of such an action, warned that the responsibility of any failure of such operation would entirely lie with the Orissa Government and specifically on Mahtab. However on 14 November 1947, the Divisional Commissioner, Mr. Senapati accompanied by Naba Krushna Choudhury led the Orissa Military Police Force and forcibly took over the administration of the Nilgiri State. The armed police

were greeted by local people all along their way to Nilgiri. The Communists who were active in the Nilgiri *Prajamandal* Movement also lent their support to the move. Finally, the *Raja* of Nilgiri, handed over the administration of the State without any resistance and immediately issued a proclamation exhorting his subjects and the state officials to extend fullest support and co-operation to the new administration. Thus Nilgiri came to be administered as an 'occupied' territory of Orissa Government. The occupation of Nilgiri was legalised on 1 Jan. 1948, when all the Orissa Princely States were merged with the province.

The occupation of Nilgiri encouraged Mahtab to take up the issue of merger vigorously with Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. V.P. Menon was, however, in favour of evolving a system of joint control thereby leaving some administrative powers in the hands of the princes and thus stood opposed to the idea of merger conceived by Mahtab. Objecting to the proposal of Menon, Mahtab persuaded Patel to come down to Cuttack on 13 December 1947 to attend a meeting of the Rulers of Orissa States to settle the issue. Accordingly, Patel and Menon visited Orissa on 15 Dec. Patel was accorded a rousing welcome by the people all along the way from Bhubaneswar to Cuttack. The people also organised a huge demonstration demanding the merger of the states. Meanwhile, Patel had almost agreed to the suggestion of Mahtab on the complete merger of all categories of state, Viz. 'A', 'B' and 'C'. Thus, the earlier memorandum relating to the merger of the states was redrafted with the help of Chief Secretary of the Provincial Government on 14 December. When the rulers of Orissa conferred with Patel and Mahtab, the former referred to the earlier memorandum of association which had been sent to them. Patel and Mahtab disowned knowledge of it. Patel instead, categorically warned the rulers, "If you do not accept our proposal I don't take responsibility for law and order in your state. You take care of yourself". As the *Prajamandal* leaders in the states were almost ready to overthrow the princes and effect merger by force, the rulers accepted the new scheme. Thus Orissa not only became the

originator of the idea of merger but also the first province where the risk was taken to effect the scheme of merger. This no doubt, paved the way for the solution of a knotty problem created by the British before the transfer of power.

In the broader perspective of the Post-Independence politics, Mahtab's efforts in monitoring the Nilgiri operation was indeed a superb strategy. The occupation of Nilgiri State marked the beginning of the process of the merger of princely states with the Indian Union which attained its culmination with the taking over of Hyderabad State. In this sense therefore, Mahtab's contributions to the making of this 'beginning' became his greatest achievement as a statesman. Praising his role in the integration of princely states with Orissa, Durga Das in his book *India from Curzon to Nehru and After* points out : "...Patel told me that the idea had originated with H.K. Mahtab who formed in 1938 the *State Praja Mandal*, an organisation of the people living in the States of Orissa. This Orissa Congress leader proposed that the small states be merged with the province under British administration and the States People Conference appointed a committee with Mahtab as its Chairman to study the proposal in relation to Orissa. The Committee recommended that the states be brought under the Provincial Government as reforms in them, while they maintained their separateness would have no value. Mahtab took up this matter with Cripps when he came to India in 1942. The Political Department agreed that this was the only feasible solution of the problem but did nothing about it. When India became independent, the British departed leaving the states as they were. Mahtab convinced Gandhi and Patel of the soundness of his scheme and he suggested to Patel in November 1947 that he should set the process in motion in Orissa".

Talking about his experience on the issue of merger, Patel pointed out that "it was in this atmosphere of a great psychological change and fast disappearing barriers that I had the privilege of initiating the twin process of integration and democratisation which

from its small beginning in distant Orissa has gradually swept over the whole of the sub-continent. Centuries ago, it was the proud privilege of 'Kalinga' to arouse awakening in a great monarch who became in the course of time not only a sovereign, but also a great guide, friend and philosopher of his people. Few had dreamt and none had imagined that it would be from the same land that there will start a revolutionary change which would achieve for India the same measure of unity and strength and security which India had attained under the distinguished ruler, Ashoka". He went on further to compliment Mahtab profusely saying that, "A true patriot in that he loves Orissa but loves India more. A practical and a born leader of men, Mahtab has carved out for himself a name which will live in Orissa's history. More than ten years ago, he conceived a future for Orissa, which he had the good fortune to realise in his own life time". Emphasising the role and contribution of Mahtab for effecting the merger of princely states, Patel noted: "he was the living spirit in that drama. I am happy that I helped him to realise what was not only his dream and ambition, but also the dream and ambition of all Oriyas. I am happier still that it was that backward province, as they call it, which led the way for the rest of India to follow".

Undoubtedly, it was Mahtab who acted resolutely to bring about the integration of princely states with the Orissa province. Considered from this standpoint, he was appropriately described as the "Maker of Greater Orissa" during his life-time and thereafter.

However, the post-merger phase marked a period of acute conflict between the two neighbouring provinces of Bihar and Orissa over the issue of Saraikala and Kharswan. The virtual endorsement by the Rulers of Saraikala and Kharswan to the merger pact on 14 December 1947 and the subsequent taking over of the administration of both the states by the Orissa Government was resented by some inhabitants there. The *Adivasis* of these two states under the leadership of Jaipal Singh carried on a campaign against the Orissa Government and protested the merger of the states with Orissa. Besides, the Rulers of Eastern States

Union branded the movement by the *Adivasis* as an anti-merger agitation and favoured the idea of the Union of the States. They actively encouraged the movement unfortunately. However, much to the dismay of the Orissa Government, in April, 1948, the Government of India announced that Saraikala and Kharswan being two island states in the district of Singhbhum should be merged with Bihar and argued that it was impossible for these states to be efficiently managed by any other Government except the one which was responsible for the administration of the district of Singhbhum. This came as a severe blow to the Government of Orissa. Afterwards, during the phase of states' reorganisation, Mahtab maintained an 'intriguing indifference' on the question of Saraikala and Kharswan for which he was subjected to severe public criticism in his own state.

The decision of the Central Government in November 1948 to merge the Mayurbhanja State with Orissa also evoked protest by the *Adivasis* of Mayurbhanja under the leadership of Sonaram Soren and Rama Chandra Majhi who demanded the merger of Mayurbhanja with Bihar like that of Saraikala and Kharswan. But, when the movement took a violent turn, the Government of Orissa intervened and quelled the movement with an iron hand. The armed police deputed by the Government of Orissa resorted to firing, massive arrest and imposition of punitive tax on the tribals. Mahtab and V.P. Menon fully masterminded the operation against this movement. In a meeting at Rairangpur, Mahtab explained to the tribals about the advisability to merge with Orissa and declared that punitive tax amounting to one lakh would be spent for public works. The merger of Mayurbhanja with Orissa was legalised on 1 January 1949.

The other notable achievements of the Mahtab Ministry may be summarised as follows:

In order to help the Oriya peasants, the Ministry hiked the selling price of the paddy and rice. Mahtab's contention was that as cultivation of paddy was the mainstay for the peasants of Orissa

and as the Oriya peasant had to purchase the necessities of life by selling the paddy, the peasants should be offered the due price at the time of purchasing paddy and rice. This move by the Ministry was opposed by the middle class in the urban areas. However, by organising the peasants, and by defending the issue of price hike of paddy to protect the interests of peasants in his daily *Prajatantra* he could manage to scotch the reaction in the urban areas against the move. Mahtab realised that some of the newspapers were championing the cause of urban middle class and criticised the aforesaid move of the Government. It may be mentioned here that Mahtab at one time had convinced Gandhi that if the selling of rice was regulated properly in Orissa, it would not only help the poor peasants by reducing the prospect of famine in the province but more crucially Orissa could also be in a position to supply food stuffs to other provinces.

Being an ardent follower of Gandhian values, Mahtab took up the programme of entry of *harijans* to the temples. Under his initiative, the *harijans* and the tribals from different regions of Orissa were brought to Puri in order to enter into the temple of Lord Jagannath on the very day when the ashes of Mahatma Gandhi were immersed in the sea.

To promote Oriya literature, Mahtab took keen interest in bringing out a monthly literary journal called *Jhankar* and established the tradition of organising an annual literary festival called *Bisuva Milan* which continues till-date. More significantly, in order to promote a strong Oriya cultural identity, the *Prajatantra Prachara Samity* was organised to serve as a platform for promoting children's literature, Oriya dramas and plays and writings by women. An English daily titled *The Eastern Times* was also published simultaneously from the *Prajatantra* Press. Mahtab also took keen personal interest in holding the annual session of the All India History Congress in Utkal University in 1949. Similarly, in order to promote sports activities in Orissa, he engaged Bhairab Charan Mohanty, an eminent participant of '42 movement, to

organise the 'Olympic Association' at Cuttack. In course of time, a spectacular stadium at Cuttack called the Barabati Stadium was built up under the efforts of the 'Olympic Association'.

Mahtab's dreams of a modern Orissa was significantly realised when Prime Minister Nehru laid the foundation stone of Hirakud Dam and of the New Capital at Bhubaneswar on 12 and 13 April, 1949, respectively. A small incident that occurred on the occasion is interesting enough to merit mention. When Nehru objected to the spelling of Bhubaneswar and stated that it should be Bhuvaneswar and refused to sign in the specially prepared paper carrying the name of the New Capital, Mahtab pointed out that the correct Oriya pronunciation was Bhubaneswar and thus it was to be written like that. Following some dicussion, Nehru felt convinced and signed the paper. This small incident speaks of the love of Mahtab for Oriya language.

In his obsession to industrialise Orissa, Mahtab immensely helped Mr. Biju Patnaik in the latter's several projects like Kalinga Air Lines, Orissa Textile Mill, and the scheme for the production of petrol from coal at Talcher.

Around March, 1949, Mahtab was persuaded by Lady Mountbatten and Nehru to join the Central Cabinet. On 12 May, 1950, Mahtab went to Delhi to join his new assignment. Before relinquishing his office, Mahtab chose Nabakrushna Choudhury as his successor at the advice of two progressive leaders, namely, Biju Patnaik and Biren Mitra. However, the popular demand inside the Congress Party was in favour of Biswanath Das.

In order to understand the perspective of the Congress Ministry under Mahtab's leadership, his observation in the first Assembly meeting at the New Capital of Bhubaneswar on 10 October 1949 makes interesting reading. He pointed out: ". . . it is difficult to conceal the feeling of excitement which I for one am having over this particular session of the Provincial Legislative Assembly which will go down in history as the beginning of a new era in this province. My heart leaps up with excitement when I

remember the day, the 30 September 1946, on which I moved the resolution in the Legislative Assembly that the capital of the province should be located at Bhubaneswar. We are meeting at the New Capital and the Assembly to-day consists of more members on account of amalgamation of the states with the Province. The two historic incidents have been combined in to-day's function and that is the cause of great excitement for me. . . An ancient and historic family, which was artificially divided for hundreds of years and forcibly kept separated, has again joined together and the members are determined to start the joint life again, with full confidence, both in the present and in future. I welcome the new members who have joined us today and with whom our fate has been linked up for the common good of the province.

"I take this opportunity to assure again the backward classes and those who are of late described as *Adivasi* that their interest will be the main concern of this House and no Government dare do anything against the interests of the backward classes and tribes. I look forward with great hope and expectation to the day when these classes will be represented in this House by persons of their own number and the House knows it that day is not far off.

"In the meantime let all of us who constitute this Assembly make common cause with the backward classes and do everything in our power to ameliorate their condition and bring them to the same level as others in the province.

"... We (Government and Opposition) all along agreed to differ and the same atmosphere I am sure will continue and the common object of all shall be development of Orissa within the shortest possible time. For reasons over which the people of their province have had no control, this unfortunate part of the country has not been able to keep pace with the progress which some of our neighbours have made in the course of last two centuries. The main reason for the backwardness of this province was its division into several political units. That reason does not exist today and we must take full advantage of the situation and try to make up the

leeway as early as possible. On many occasions in the past I have said that for Orissa the order should be one of "Double March". We have to make up the leeway and at the same time proceed further so that we may not continue to remain behind any longer. . . .For efficiency of administration, criticism is essential. Views expressed from different angles of vision enable those who are in charge of administration to formulate sound and effective policies. It is necessary therefore, to have the views of the Hon'ble members on all matters from their respective standpoints. Fortunately for this Assembly, one of our colleagues is a leader of the Communist Party. He used to help the administration by expressing his views in whatever way he liked on the floor of this House. Unfortunately, he considered it worthwhile to go underground and thereby serve the country better. It is a wrong judgement, I must say. Underground activities have no place whatsoever in a democratic country. I have therefore gone out of my way to issue an appeal to him through the press to attend the session of the Assembly and I have guaranteed him full freedom for any kind of constitutional activities he carries on. I am told, I have taken a risk. If it is so, it is perhaps worth taking. Government wants to know the views of the Communist Party on different matters and is prepared to discuss with them, provided they agree to constitutional methods of work. Since I am anxious to secure the co-operation of all sections in the great task of the development of the province, I thought I should take the risk of inviting the Communist Leader also to join our deliberations.

"I invite the Rulers of the Ex-states areas also for co-operation. Now that the merger is final and there is not the slightest chance of separation of unity, the talent which the Rulers possess should be utilised for the development of the province. . . .I earnestly hope that even from outside they will choose to render all assistance in whatever way they like either by support or by constructive criticism.

"There is, as a matter of fact very little scope for acute

difference of opinion on any point. It is easy to harmonise different tones and make charming music out of it provided all the reeds are in order and respond to the common rhythm which is 'Development of Orissa'. I hope and pray our combined wisdom will enable the province to march and occupy a place of importance in our great country".

MAHTAB IN NEHRU CABINET

Mahtab, under the invitation of Jawaharlal Nehru, joined the Central Cabinet as the Minister for Industry and Supply on 13 May, 1950. Interestingly, Mahtab's inclusion in the Central Cabinet led to a growing speculation that he was being groomed to succeed Nehru. Some sections of London Press spread such views to this effect.

The first thing Mahtab did after taking over the charge of the Ministry concerned was to remove all the existing restrictions with regard to industries in private sectors. Proposals for starting new industries in private sectors without financial assistance from Government were immediately cleared by the Ministry. As a result, a number of industries started in a few months time all over India. In this connection, it should be noted that Mahtab had granted a licence for manufacture of tubes to the Tatas who however, were not in a position to start the manufacture as they lacked the necessary know-how. But in the meantime Biju Patnaik who claimed to possess the required know-how was granted the licence and his 'Kalinga Tubes' factory started production two years before the production of the Tatas took off. The whole idea of awarding Mr. Patnaik, the said licence as against the Tatas was conceived by Mahtab who had realised that expansions in the private sector were being held up in the interest of a few monopolists and the latter in their attempt to maintain short supply of goods in order to profit from high prices in future were not only opposing all

controls but also competition. He often used to describe this phenomenon as 19th century capitalism of the western countries. Considerably encouraged by J.R.D. Tata, Mahtab piloted and got the above bill concerning the licensing of industries in the private sector duly passed in the Parliament. Of course, the Industrial licensing law was much abused afterwards.

Further, his proposal regarding the constitution of Board of Industries to regulate the day-to-day affairs concerning public sector and some of his valuable suggestions to the Planning Commission regarding the planned economic development of India were not accepted by the Government. In this context, Mahtab had submitted a note to the Planning Commission: "...The model of a highly developed capitalist economy does not evidently suit the conditions of India. Similarly, the model of a highly regimented communist economy does not suit the conditions prevailing in India. In any kind of economy in India, agriculture must be the centre of it. With this basic fact, the two other factors have to be taken into consideration, namely, absence of a thick layer of capital in any section of the society and the bulk of the population remaining unemployed in rural areas. In these circumstances, it is not practical to plan for mass production and then for regulated distribution in a huge country like India. The most practical plan therefore will be to divide the country into as many regions as to form economic units on the basis of production taking place in the same area and approximately to the same extent as the consumption is required. The basic policy of development of these regions will be self-sufficiency. Gandhiji categorically stated on many occasions that production should not be concentrated in particular areas, for, in that case, he said, 'We would have to go about in a round about way to regulate distribution, whereas, if there is production and distribution both in the respective areas where things are required, it is automatically regulated and there is less chance for fraud, none for speculation'..."

While suggesting a distinct mechanism to ensure mass

participation in the process of the economic development of the nation, he observed: ". . . A Development Board has to be set up by the Central Government and each state will set up a Development Board of its own. A law has to be passed in each state authorising areas or regions, as fixed by the Development Board, of the state to set up an authority on cooperative lines to produce whatever necessities are required for the consumption of that particular area or region. This cooperative authority shall have the power to make levies also either in the shape of cash or kind, for carrying out projects as approved by the Development Board of the State. The Central Development Board will be the supervising authority and also it shall supply the necessary technical help to various State Development Boards. . . The only change that will be required to be made is that new system will have to be built with a new outlook and a new objective. The set-up can easily be worked out in great detail once it is accepted and announced as the policy of the Nehru Government based upon the teachings of Gandhiji".

Mahtab was dismayed to find the Planning Commission being manned by such bureaucrats who failed to forge a comprehensive Indian model of development which addressed to the specific needs of the Indian economy. In Mahtab's opinion, these bureaucrats had a firm conviction regarding the efficacy of American model of capitalist development and thus prepared such plans so as to earn the appreciation of the western economists, particularly the Americans. He also realised that the top leadership placed implicit faith in those who were influenced by the western capitalist economy. Thus in the post-47 era, Nehru, according to Mahtab, left the job of policy making in the hands of erstwhile bureaucrats. This was precisely due to this reason many valuable proposals concerning the economic development of India as mooted by Mahtab could not be appreciated by the then Government of India. Mahtab was also not a very enthusiastic taker of the mixed economy idea as propounded by the Nehru Cabinet. In his view, "Declaration of 'mixed economy' as a state policy while aiming at socialism at the

end encouraged the shrewd capitalists to have their own way by some means; it did not encourage the general public to go in for private industries nor did it encourage investment in private industries.

... This (also) implied full encouragement and assistance to the private capitalists to expand their industries in the specified sector. But here there was the inhibition not to allow a long rope to the private capitalists but to adopt a patronising attitude towards them, reminding them always that they were an unwanted section in the patriotic society. This led to an atmosphere of corruption in which the Government machinery was involved in course of time".

Similarly, after taking over the additional charge of Commerce Ministry, following the relinquishing of commerce portfolio by Shri Prakash, Mahtab reconstituted the Import Advisory Council. He nominated to this council representatives of all the Indian States. Mahtab had realised that most of the Indian States being land-locked, having no port facility were in a disadvantageous position vis-a-vis the port towns which monopolised the import trade. It was for this reason, Shri Prakash, as the Commerce Minister had thought it worthwhile to amend the rules and allow a certain percentage of newcomers along with the established importers into the trade. But the vested interests in the trade sharply reacted to the new procedure and organised an agitation against Shri Prakash which led to the latter's removal from commerce portfolio. But Mahtab once again, toed the same line of Shri Prakash. As usual he was bitterly criticised in the Parliament over this policy. This new policy on Import Trade was reversed when he left the Ministry. Mahtab had the feeling that decentralisation of trade and breaking up the monopoly of the traders of Bombay, Calcutta, Madras and Delhi who almost dominated such trade was the right step in the direction of socialism. During Mahtab's tenure as the Industry and Supply Minister, Pencilm factory at Pimpri, Machine Tools in Bangalore, Hindustan Aeronautics, Sindri Fertiliser Factory etc. were established in India.

After the death of Sardar Patel, Nehru thought of imparting

socialistic orientation to the Indian democracy by bringing necessary amendments to the Indian Constitution. When Mahtab's suggestions were sought for, the latter recommended basic amendments to Articles 14, 19 and 31 of the Constitution. Regarding Article 14 of the Constitution, he had pleaded that "equality before law shall not preclude more favourable treatment to socially and economically backward sections of the community and the judgement in this respect should be left entirely to the representatives of the people namely the Parliament". His view was that "... in India the common man requires better and preferential treatment". Thus, he had viewed Article 14, in its original form, as a legal impediment in the way of attaining economic democracy.

Mahtab was also opposed to the idea of right to property and freedom of enterprise and the notion of "reasonable restriction" as contained in the Article 19 since such provisions were borrowed from the U.S. Constitution based on the concept of a capitalist economy.

Similarly, as regard to Article 31 of the Indian Constitution, dealing with the acquisition of property on payment of compensation, Mahtab viewed that, "It is significant that this provision in the Constitution goes too far ahead of the corresponding section in the old Government of India Act 1935, in protecting the vested interests... But the present Constitution of India has taken away the right of the legislature and of the Head of the State, which was once given by the Government of India Act 1935. Today, the legislature can not pass any law reforming the present land revenue system or any other system which would affect the income of individuals because of Article 31 of the Constitution. This is a serious blunder which has been committed and I do not think any plausible explanation can be found as to why the provision of Sec. 299 (3) of the old Government of India Act 1935, was so much improved upon in the interest of vested interests and against all kinds of economic reforms.

If social and economic reforms are considered necessary

and which I believe urgent, then the principles underlying the above three Articles in the Constitution should be appropriately revised and necessary amendments made in appropriate places. Otherwise, the Constitution as it is will not only maintain the *status quo* but will petrify the present deplorable condition of the common man, with all his social and economic handicaps".

It is noteworthy that though his suggestions for amendment to the Constitution did not find ready response in the Nehru's Cabinet, such revisions were attempted in the 1970s.

In October, 1951, Nehru deputed Mahtab to represent the Government of India in the Commonwealth Ministers' Conference in London. A Public reception was arranged for Mahtab in London under the Presidentship of Miss Agatha Harrison with whom the former had been quite intimate right since the days of Major Bazellette murder incident in Ranpur State during 1939. In fact, it was Miss Harrison who had saved Mahtab for his alleged involvement in the murder case. Mahtab was also invited to lunch by Lady and Lord Mountbatten during his stay there. He also called on the then Prime Minister of England Major Atlee. Mahtab was surprised to observe that Atlee despite a busy schedule spoke to him for nearly twenty minutes and enquired from Mahtab about *Raja* of Kanika and Laxmidhar Mohanty, whom he knew when he had been to India as a member of Simon Commission and dealt with the demand for a separate province of Orissa. Mr. Krishna Menon who was then the High Commissioner in London wrote to Nehru detailing his impression about Mahtab's visit and activities in the Commonwealth Conference.

He observed:

"I am sure you will be happy to hear that, the Commerce Minister (Mahtab) produced a very favourable and healthy impression on the United Kingdom Ministers and on Commonwealth representatives and on other persons whom he met here. At the Conference and in his informal conversations, he made a deep impression by his sincerity and knowledge of his

subject. People were anxious to listen to him and they appreciated that he went to the point quickly and understood the essence of an argument. It would be improper for me as your mere High Commissioner to appear to write what is a 'testimonial' and I hope, I am not giving you that impression; but since it is his first visit here I feel you would like to know how he fared. His ways and general simplicity also were much liked. . . Although the two speeches he made at the Conference were drafted for him he spoke more or less for himself, using the material and he made a particularly good impression at the first one with his reference to the King, using the wording of your own telegram to the King. . . I found him ready to listen and to give advice. He was free and easy in conversation. . . He was easily the top of the visiting Ministers some of whom, like Mr. Howe, has had some fifteen years as a Cabinet Minister. Mr. Louw of South Africa was in some ways more able and more tenacious but he had not the status of Harekrushna Mahtab nor did he convey the quality of quiet reserve and forcefulness without aggressiveness which our Minister conveyed".

Mahtab had the opportunity to meet Mr. Rownald, the Secretary to the Industries Department and also the member of the Viceroy's Executive Committee. He was impressed to learn that despite Mr. Rownald's opposition to the nationalisation of big industries including steel, the latter was sincerely carrying out the Labour Government's policy of the nationalisation of steel industries. Mr. Rownald explained to Mahtab that industries under the control of Government had been kept outside the political influence of the party and the Government so as to ensure continuity of policy even when a Government changed. Besides, Mahtab also learnt quite a bit about the nature of administration as well as the inner working of the Labour Party by interacting with various officials as well as Ministers during his stay in London. He was thoroughly impressed to see that Ministers in England leading a very simple life as if being influenced by Gandhian ideals in contrast to the luxurious life-styles of the Ministers of the then Congress Government in India.

Towards the end of 1950, Mahtab had got himself involved in the political controversy between Patel and Nehru regarding the question of election to the post of President of Congress Organisation. In fact, Mahtab endorsed Nehru's choice of Acharya Kripalani as against the candidature of Patel's nominee, Purusottam Das Tandon. He even wrote a book titled *Road Ahead* which propagated the view that Nehru should be accepted as the sole leader of the Congress. As Mahtab himself pointed out later on: "In this controversy I was expected to play a positive role by both sides. Weighing the pros and cons of the entire political situation of India, I thought Jawaharlalji should be given all support". However, Tondon who won the election and became the President of the Congress organisation subsequently resigned from the post of Presidentship following the resignation of Nehru and his associates from the Working Committee. It was in this context, Mahtab took the lead in suggesting that the Prime Minister and President of the Congress should be one and the same person and thus Nehru was elected as the President. Thus, the swiftness with which Mahtab switched his loyalties from being an out and out Patelite to a follower of Nehruvian camp points to his pragmatic approach to the contemporary politics.

As an ardent supporter of Patel, however, his perception of Patel merits attention. Talking about Patel, Mahtab writes in his *Memoir* : "I cannot help mentioning here something about the misunderstanding which was continuously created by the Congress socialists to whom Jawaharlalji was an ideal socialist. Regarding Sardar Patel's views about socio-economic matters, he was continuously depicted as a supporter of the capitalists while Jawaharlalji was anti-capitalist."

After the death of Sardar Patel, the difference of Mahtab with Nehru widened and in a way sharpened. On many occasions Mahtab along with other Gandhian leaders like Mr. N.V. Gadgil, and C.D. Deshmukh could not appreciate the Prime Minister not taking the cabinet into confidence. Dr. Rajendra Prasad's open

disagreement with Nehru on the issue of Hindu Code Bill had definitely provided him the required impulse. First, Mahtab made no secret of his objections to Nehru's approval of the community development scheme in India without consulting the Cabinet. The scheme was proposed by the-then American Ambassador Chester Bowles and involved large scale American aid. Objecting to the idea of American aid for community development scheme in India, in a letter to Nehru on 6-3-52, Mahtab had pointed out : "There is no doubt that community projects are essential and urgent. But they should be executed out of our own resources so that both may be co-related. Community projects should not be beyond the resources of the country; if they are, then they will have no continuity and also full use will not be made of them by the people. There might be moral degradation also when amenities are afforded as charitable gifts. But minor irrigation and such other programmes which will be enjoyable on payment of some tax may be legitimately carried out from the help received... It is to be considered whether the foreign help will not likely affect your policy adversely. When the community projects will be taken up all over India, the Americans are likely to make the best use of them to popularise themselves in India. They will have an opportunity of coming in direct contact with the people as distinguished from their leaders. It is very likely that Communists will try to counteract the influence of Americans in their own way. Rural areas in this way may be subjected to propaganda in favour of or against one or the other. Our people also may lose faith in themselves as they get something which their resources do not permit, but which they get as a result of the charity of somebody else.

But India requires foreign assistance badly. It is therefore necessary to see that the assistance which is received is used in such a way that it will have no direct concern with the common people, nor should it be considered as some additional continuous resources of the country. From this point of view, it will perhaps be better if the foreign assistance is used for building up capital projects such as basic industries like steel, multipurpose dams etc. and

money provided for these from our own resources is diverted to finance the community projects... Incidentally, I may mention that the way in which the American Ambassador is moving about and calling upon the youths to stand by what U.S.A. stands for must invite Russian Embassy to start similar propaganda as a result of which there is likely to be large scale conflict of ideologies in the country. This perhaps will not do good to us and will cut across the policy which you have been following. " However, Nehru was in 'serious disagreement' with Mahtab for the latter's views

Similarly when Mahtab campaigned vigorously for the abolition of privy purses of the Rulers, Nehru warned Mahtab against such propaganda. In a letter to Mahtab, Nehru wrote :"I see from the newspapers that you have been making some very positive and far-reaching statements about the princes. You have said that their privy purses must be put an end to. Indeed, you have gone further and said that you are going to do it within a year or so. This is most embarrassing. Many of us feel that these privy purses are too bloated. Nevertheless, we have committed ourselves to them and we cannot easily walk through our commitments.

I have referred to this matter in a different context and said that where a prince misbehaves politically, or otherwise, then this question arises. I wish you would not say anything which commits Government in this way. Our States Ministry is greatly embarrassed."

Further, Mahtab reminded Nehru of the "distinct signs of deterioration" in the administrative set up of India. Thus in a letter to Nehru, he pointed out: "Now that the first chapter of our administrative career has come to an end, I take this opportunity to have a retrospective view of the administration as such, which we carried on under your leadership. The object of writing this letter to you is to place before you certain vital problems of administration which, if not tackled boldly and tactfully might land the country in enormous difficulty later on." In this letter he went on to observe: "To-day it is not only *Swaraj* but a democratic

Swaraj which the administrative machinery must be tuned to serve as efficiently as possible. At the initial stage when various abnormal situations arose as a result of the change of Government it was not possible to give due attention to effecting necessary changes in the administrative machinery. But the machinery is not in the same condition today as it was when it was handed over to us. There is considerable deterioration in all spheres of administration and further deterioration is inevitable unless some effective steps are taken. The legislatures have vested the officers with so many abnormal powers. If a proper enquiry is made today about the numerous shooting incidents in the course of the last several years, it will be easily found that in most of the cases, it was the incompetency of the officers which led to the firing at the end. The competency which was required of an officer in the British days to meet a particular situation does not exist today. There is neither the fear complex nor the sense of duty and patriotism to make the officers who can be weighed in gold, as Sardar Patel once said in the Parliament, yet generally the officers in the districts, where the administration is felt by the people have become a sort of dictators in their own spheres. The discontent which is expressed by the people is more on account of these officers than for anything else.

I do not exaggerate when I say that situation would have been much worse but for your towering personality at the top and the political reputation of some of the provincial leaders. But a system has to be evolved to meet the changed situation. It is a very hard work which will most certainly require at least ten years to be remodelled; but it has to be taken up immediately. I may mention here that whenever I discuss these problems with experienced officers, all of them immediately agree that things are going wrong, but nobody has got the courage and energy to set it right. Now I think the time has come when this has to be attended to".

While keeping himself busy with manifold activities as a Cabinet Minister in the Centre, Mahtab never lost touch with Orissa.

He continued to write the editorials regularly for his own literary Oriya monthly *Jhankar*, and the dailies like the *Prajatantra* and the *Eastern Times*. Thus, he continued to retain his literary touch despite political preoccupation. In 1950, the Andhra University conferred on him the honorary Degree of Doctor of Letters.

It was under Mahtab's intervention that the Bhadrak Block (Mahtab's native place) was selected as one of the sites out of the total three, for the experimentation of the community development programme sponsored by the Centre. Each block had been allotted Rs. 66 lakh for the above scheme. Mahtab despite his strong opposition to the community development programme on the American line had reconciled to the scheme with the belief that the programme could be converted into a Gandhian one in due course. When the staunch Gandhian like, Mira Ben called on Mahtab to complain that the American Scheme of community development would cause massive damage to the Gandhian conception of constructive activities in the rural areas, Mahtab had told her accordingly. But to his utter dismay, he found that Mira Ben left India for good as she felt that India had given up Gandhiji. In the meanwhile, Mahtab got in touch with Horace Alexander, of the Quacker's society of Philadelphia, who was an out and out Gandhian and an intimate friend of Mahtab right since 1927. In fact, Horace Alexander had met Mahtab when the latter was the Chief Minister in Orissa in 1947 and advised Mahtab to take more care about the villages than to go for massive industrialisation of Orissa. Following the launching of the scheme of community development on American line in India, Horace had displayed his interest in involving the Quakers in village development work in Orissa. As Mahtab was convinced that the Quakers perspective of rural development was based on Gandhian line, he suggested to Horace that Barapali in Sambalpur district should be adopted for the community development scheme. Afterwards, the Quakers who settled down in Barapali, with their expert personnel to monitor different branches of development of the rural sector, studied the village life in all its aspects and suggested

innovative ways to effect changes in the life and the habits of the villagers. These experts developed a whole series of rural facilities like Barpali latrine, Barapali well, Barapali cloth washing apparatus etc. which became quite popular brands all over Orissa. The impact of Barapali model of development was such that, this model came to be increasingly adopted in many rural areas of Orissa. These simple, yet cost-effective inventions and facilities also became popular in small towns. But unfortunately the Government sponsored blocks failed to receive any message from the Barapali experiment of the Quakers. Rather, Government sponsored programmes with lot of money and officials at their disposal, started competing with the Barapali scheme. This specific development frustrated the enthusiasm of the Quakers who later on gave up their job of rural development. Thus the golden chance of translating Gandhian conception of rural development into reality with voluntary and enthusiastic participation of the people could not be realised. Instead began the era of community development based more on propaganda and less on real popular participation. Mahtab thus realised that Nehru was championing a perspective which was entirely different from that of Gandhiji. His perception regarding Nehru during this period and his virtual helplessness as an enthusiastic Gandhian constructive activist is best illustrated when he observes in his Memoir " . . . since I was for many years a constructive worker on Gandhian line, it was expected of me that I should fight out the reverse process which was started by Jawaharlal Nehru. How I wish I could. First, it was not possible to go against the current which was gaining momentum almost everyday under the dynamic leadership of Jawaharlalji. At this distance of time and with the experience which has been gained meanwhile, I must confess that Jawaharlalji, could create the confidence that his way as distinct from that of Gandhiji would hold the ground in the modern world. It was therefore far away from one's thought that there should be some resistance to slow down the pace. Resistance meant resignation and retirement to wilderness. Many like me were victims of that period who have

lived to realise that India went a wrong way and she has to retrace her steps to the old forsaken path of Gandhiji. It will be hypocritical if I do not confess that the temptation of Government offices was also strong in compelling me to adjust to many things which were not appealing to the 'small voice within'.

However, his differences with Nehru resulted in his being dropped from the Nehru Cabinet which was formed after the General Elections of 1952. However, Mahtab who was given the charge of supervising the election campaign of Assam, Bengal and Orissa got the opportunity to understand the problem of the *Ahmiyas* and the tribals of Assam as well as the strong cultural ties that existed between Orissa and Bengal during these election tours. Nehru's explanation for dropping Mahtab from the Cabinet was loud and clear. Nehru hardly minced his feeling that as Mahtab had tended to differ from him on issues like community development scheme etc, the latter could not fit into a Nehruvian 'homogenous' cabinet. The news was shocking for him, yet he immediately overcame it. At this critical juncture, Sri Rajagopalachari had advised Mahtab that the latter should try to be a philosopher apart from his standing reputation of being a scholar. This in fact, helped Mahtab considerably to reconcile to the changing reality.

POLITICS IN THE POST-INDEPENDENCE ORISSA

The political scenario in Orissa witnessed significant shifts following the merger of the princely states of Western Orissa. Hitherto ruled by the *Rajas* under the protective umbrella of the British, these *garjat* regions with substantial tribal population had remained like self-contained structures being administratively cut off from the British Orissa (the *Mugalbandi*). After merger these people came to feel the weight of a superimposing bureaucracy associated with the Post-Independence Congress which resulted in some kind of resentment against its leadership. Besides, the traditional divide between the hill areas and the coastal areas made the task of consolidating the organisational hold of Congress in hill tracts a cumbersome affair for nearly a decade. On the otherhand, to fill up the political vacuum in the hill tracts following the merger, regional political organisations under the leadership of some former ruling chiefs took shape. This ultimately led to the rise of a political outfit named the *Ganatantra Parishad*. In fact, the launching of the *Gantantra Parishad* on the eve of the first General Elections of 1952 was preceded by the organisation of *Koshala Utkal Praja Parishad* in 1948. The idea of floating the latter took off in the wake of the merger of princely states when some ex-rulers alongwith the *Prajamandal* dissidents and a group of disgruntled Congressmen distanced themselves from the Congress. Backed by anti-merger agitators, these people grouped together to form a party under R.N.Singh Deo, the ex-*Raja* of

Bolangir Patna. Precisely due to this weak positioning of Congress in hill areas, the overall strength of the party in the State became weak and it failed to secure majority in the Assembly in the very first general elections of 1952. The Congress came to face a stiff challenge to its hegemony from the *Gantantra Parishad* Party. Both in the 1st and 2nd General Elections, the Congress Party failed to secure majority in the Assembly and yet formed the Government with the help of independents or the members of Jharkhand Party. This broad scenario prevailing in the 50s in connection with Ministry-making efforts of the Congress lacking in clear-cut majority initiated a distinct phase of political instability in the State.

Following the 2nd General Election, the Congress Ministry was seriously threatened with problem of no confidence motion and therefore it was increasingly realised that a Coalition Government between the Congress and the *Gantantra Parishad* was the only viable political option for the sustenance of a stable Government in Orissa. And this political marriage was solemnised under the leadership of Mahtab in due course.

It may be noted here that the political restructuring during Post-Independence era greatly depended on the style of leadership as well as the political perception of Mahtab himself. His policies and the politics in Orissa during this phase became more or less interwoven.

Mahtab had undoubtedly emerged as the unchallenged leader of the Congress Party following the merger of ex-princely states of which he had remained the principal architect. That achievement not only enhanced his popular image but also increased his political weight with the Congress High Command. Even though Mahtab was known as a Patelite, yet he had considerably impressed Nehru during his tenure of Chief Ministership from 1946-50.

It was in this difficult period of transition, that Mahtab not only tried his best to consolidate the Congress rule, but also adopted a developmental perspective to build a strong and prosperous

modern Orissa. The noteworthy developmental activities which were completed during this period were the Hirakud Dam, the New Capital at Bhubaneswar, the Kalinga Iron Works at Barbil, Ferro-Manganese Plants at Joda and Rayagada, four refractories, one cement factory, one steel tube mill, one aluminium plant, one aluminium cable plant, Orissa Mining Corporation, a few industrial estates as well as the establishment of State Financial Corporation. Alongwith Hirakud, two other major irrigation projects such as Mahanadi Delta and the Salandi, and seven other medium irrigation projects were taken up for execution. The transport network as well as attempts to exploit vast mineral resources of the State and expand the scope of technical education were equally given priorities.

However, around 1949, Mahtab was thinking in terms of joining the Nehru Cabinet at the Centre following the latter's suggestion in this regard. For him, it was a much sought after opportunity because joining Central Cabinet meant he could properly represent Orissa at Centre and also equally make room for others to take up party leadership in the State. In the event of his joining the Central Cabinet, Mahtab favoured the idea that Nabakrushna Choudhury should succeed him instead of Biswanath Das, who was also a potential claimant to the post of Chief Ministership by virtue of his seniority. Mahtab's choice for Choudhury as his successor emanated from the former's close rapport with the latter.

Moreover, Choudhury being a Congress Socialist, was fairly close to Nehru due to the latter's prolonged association with the Congress Socialist leaders of India. Besides, Choudhury's track record as a deeply committed socialist leader with pro-peasant perspective had endeared him to all the top leaders of Indian National Congress including Nehru. Thus, Mahtab's logic was that by supporting Choudhury he could equally satisfy Nehru. And more importantly, Choudhury's succession meant that Mahtab's political interest in Orissa remained intact as Choudhury could be a Mahtab-friendly Chief Minister than Biswanath Das. Thus, Choudhury was prevailed upon to head the Congress Ministry in 1950.

It is noteworthy that Mahtab was able to successfully retain his hold over Congress Party during this phase of Orissa's politics by following the tactics of grooming up quite a few young politically upward-looking professionals such as Dinabandhu Sahu, Biren Mitra, Nilamani Routray and Bijayananda Patnaik popularly known as Biju Patnaik. For quite a long time, these 'Young Turks' acted as trusted lieutenants of Mahtab. Moreover, Mahtab's strong, positive equation with these youngsters enabled him to retain his unchallenged image with the youth and public at large in the State. Because, these young leaders had tremendous popularity and political influence with the people in general.

Of all these 'Young Turks' Biju Patnaik stood out to be the most promising and enterprising. He had earned the epithet of being "a remarkable Indian whose adventures will surely fill a book" in the *Memoir* of Julian Huxley. Nehru himself had described him as a "man of energy and certain ability", after Biju's adventure in Indonesia in rescuing Indonesian leaders from the clutches of the Dutch Army.

Apart from his political interest, Biju Patnaik had a strong ambition of becoming an industrialist and had dreamt of industrialising Orissa on his own without collaborating with top-industrialists like the Birlas, Dalmiyas or the Tatas. He could pursue this interest more effectively once he became the member of the State Assembly.

In 1950, as the Cabinet Minister of Industry and Supply at the Centre, Mahtab extended valuable support to Biju Patnaik to set up industries in Orissa. He also exerted his influence on some other Ministries to help Biju. In the process however, he earned the displeasure of Nehru. It was one of the reasons for which Mahtab was not included in Nehru's Cabinet after 1952. Patel also advised Mahtab not to feel anxious for a Cabinet position in Delhi. Since the Orissa's strong man could not be kept out of politics for too long, he was appointed as the Governor of Bombay in 1955.

During his tenure as Bombay Governor, Mahtab grew

fairly apprehensive of Chief Minister Choudhury for the latter's perception regarding land reforms, his concept of *Anchal* (local) administration and his policy on *Kendu* leaf and several other issues. It was in this context that the area of difference between the two erstwhile close friends widened leading to parting of company.

That Mahtab wanted to politically fight back became loud and clear when he started criticising the Choudhury Ministry through his personal columns published in his Oriya daily *The Prajatantra*. Moreover, he could also win over the support of youngsters like Dinabandhu Sahu, Biren Mitra and Banamali Patnaik who backed Mahtab in his anti-Choudhury Ministry positioning. Thus while remaining at Bombay as Governor, Mahtab did his utmost to see that Choudhury was removed from the Chief Ministership and himself returning to Orissa as Chief Minister. Mahtab was also getting slightly restless to get away from the monotony and the kind of political exile associated with the position of Governorship.

In the meantime, Nabakrushna Choudhury's Ministry came under severe criticism because of its failure on several fronts. So also, increasing administrative deficiencies during his Chief Ministership generated widespread popular antipathy. To quote a contemporary political observer Sunit Ghosh :

"The First Five Year Plan could not work in Orissa due to severe alterations of the Hirakud Dam Project, for which the power generation programme was pushed back by five years. Crores of rupees lapsed every year because the departments did not work. About 60% of minor irrigation works reported to be completed actually did not exist; so also many village roads. About 70% of the relief grant could not be spent in the year of floods. The administration was left in the hands of the officers while the Ministers engaged themselves in their own matters of narrow personal interest. The Chief Minister's interest for instance, was *Bhoodan* and Ashram Schools for *Adivasis*. Since 1953, not only the Chief Minister but the entire administration was engaged in *Bhoodan* till

a strong reaction started against it. The Finance Minister Radhanath Rath busied himself in mobilising public opinion in favour of inclusion of certain outlying Oriya-speaking areas in Orissa in the wake of the appointment of the three-men States Reorganisation Committee headed by (Justice) Fazal Ali. When floods visited in September, 1955, the devastation was unprecedented owing to the negligence of the administration in keeping the embankments in good repairs. The popular belief engineered by interested politicians that the devastation took place owing to administrative lapses created such a situation that *khadi*-wearing Congressmen and Ministers became objects of ridicule wherever they went. Even the Secretary of PCC, compelled by popular pressure, had to issue a statement criticising the Government bitterly.

At this point of time, the recommendations of the States Reorganisation Committee were made public denying Orissa-Sareikala and Kharswan - the two Oriya - speaking tracts which had been transferred to Bihar during the Mahtab Ministry of 1946-47 and public opinion in Orissa had always demanded the inclusion of these tracts in Orissa. The SRC report in fact shattered the popular expectations.

The publication of the report seemed to snowball into a mass movement enjoying the fullest backing of the State Government. When the Government of India announced the decision in this regard, PCC asked the Ministers and M.L.As to resign. But, such a stance by the Orissa State Government was seriously objected to by the Congress Working Committee. Being placed on the horns of a dilemma, the State Government finally had to use force to counter the agitation and to take care of the law and order situation which was really in a very bad shape. But, such a positioning by the Government made it more unpopular.

It was in this context that series of police firing as well as killing of some students led to violent protests. Under such a disturbing scenario, Congress President U.N.Dhebar visited Orissa in order to survey the goings-on in the State. Taking advantage of

this, a section of legislators - allegedly Mahtab's men pleaded before Dhebar that unless leadership was changed, the possibility of winning elections in 1957 was remote. They further demanded that Mahtab be installed as the leader to head the Congress Party in Orissa. But Dhebar turned a deaf ear to such allegations as he seemed to have taken it for granted that Mahtab was instrumental in engineering this kind of anti-Choudhury vitriolics.

Moreover, the anti-Mahtab faction in Orissa Congress equally complained to Nehru that Mahtab was promoting factionalism in the State Congress Party and thereby weakening the 'cohesion and discipline' in the organisation. Nehru too was quite unhappy with Mahtab when the latter being the Governor of Bombay kept himself involved in politics of manoeuvre to oust Nabakrushna Choudhury. Thus, in a personal letter to Mahtab (13.4.1956), Nehru strongly referred to the alleged complaints against the 'Mahtab Party' and asked the latter to 'tolerate' the Choudhury Ministry for a few months more.

Mahtab, in his reply to Nehru on 15 April, 1956, vehemently denied all the allegations against him. While stating that there was "cohesion and homogeneity" in the party, he pointed out that Congress today is very unpopular and it is becoming more and more unpopular everyday".

Talking about Choudhury, Mahtab wrote :

"It was pure luck that I was put in charge of the Province by Gandhiji at the very formative stage when there was nothing... when I was taken to Delhi in 1950, I committed the blunder of my life by thrusting Choudhury on the party as its leader. If I had left it free, then either Biswanath Das or Nityananda Kanungo would surely have been elected. I thought Choudhury would go on without break. It may be mentioned here that, Choudhury, Kanungo and I are of the same age and have been contemporaries, from our college days onwards. In the circumstances, going ahead of anyone is sure to create jealousy in others. Anyway, I incurred the displeasure of Kanungo because I supported Choudhury against

him... Then the General Elections came in 1952. I worked very hard to stabilise Choudhury in his position which was being challenged by Biswanath Das and Kanungo. I incurred your displeasure because I stuck to Orissa eventhough I was then a Central Minister. You will remember how angrily you were talking to me on the phone then. I was then a member of Working Committee and I voluntarily withdrew in favour of Choudhury.

I know Choudhury has been talking of resignation for the last seven years. I do not propose to go into his split personality. But as I once wrote to him in 1954, it is very wrong for a Chief Minister to talk of resignation always and the party to tolerate that for years. He should be told that he must take responsibility. He should not complain but should firmly deal with anybody who opposes his leadership, eventhough the latter may swear by the 'Mahtab Party' or any other party or individual. If not, he should resign and the State should be ruled by the President, with Chandulal Trivedi working as Governor."

It was in this context that the Congress High Command had to seriously ponder over the change of leadership. From among the three probable alternative candidates for the Chiefministership , namely Biswanath Das, Nityananda Kanungo and Mahtab, Mahtab's name was cleared by the High Command. This was because, Biswanath Das's candidature was not approved by Nehru. Kanungo opted out of the leadership contest in favour of Mahtab.

It was in this situation that Azad pressed Mahtab to take up the responsibility. However, Mahtab initially showing his reluctance for the offer wrote back to Azad that eventhough fifty Congress Legislators and other Congressmen were pressurising him to resign and get back to Orissa, he wanted to "keep aloof from Orissa politics" and instead argued for the imposition of President's rule. But, Azad was averse to the idea of imposition of President's rule, and insisted that Mahtab should unhesitatingly take up the responsibility. But unsure of Nehru's attitude towards him, Mahtab gave an intelligent reply to Azad on April 26, 1956. He said,

"... I have no desire to go to any place where the Prime Minister and the High Command will have any suspicion or prejudice about me. I am at the disposal of the Prime Minister and the High Command. If they ask me to go and take charge of Orissa, I shall do it and try my utmost to retrieve the situation. I shall carry out the order most faithfully. It is a matter not for me to decide and give the order. I do not know how the Prime Minister's mind is working. In fact, it is he who is to decide for us and for us to work for him".

On October 18, 1956, Choudhury resigned both from his office as well as the Congress and "left for his *Ashram* at Angul on foot accompanied by his wife Malati Choudhury, both carrying their personal belongings on their shoulders to join the *Sarvodaya* Movement and never to return to politics." Mahtab, finally came back from Bombay to assume leadership on October 19, 1956.

Returning to power, Mahtab provided leadership to Orissa Congress for the second General Elections in 1957. In this election, Congress could secure only 56 seats with 38% of total votes whereas *Ganatantra Parishad* captured 51 seats with 29% of total votes. In other words, *Ganatantra Parishad* emerged as a formidable rival to Congress by bettering its previous electoral performance. The Congress however, could form the Ministry with the support of the Jharkhand Party, the CPI and the independents.

On March 26, while passing the budget, the Congress could manage to do it with a clean majority and thus got the vote of confidence. But on the whole, the situation deteriorated when three Congress Legislators deserted the party. This process of floor crossing climaxed when on April 26, a Deputy Minister named Anup Singh Deo, brother-in-law of Pratap Keshari Deo, former *Maharaja* of Kalahandi and another Member, Mohan Nayak left Congress and opted to sit in the Opposition.

Following this incident, four *Ganatantra Parishad* leaders were arrested in Bhubaneswar on the charge of "abduction and unlawful confinement" of the Congress legislators like Mohan Nayak and Ghashiram Majhi. Mahtab sought to justify his retaliatory action

by maintaining that the ex-rulers were making a last bid to throw out the Government in order to forestall the bill for assessment of the lands of rulers which was on the floor. These ex-rulers had thousands of acres of private land and once assessment was done the ordinary land laws would apply to them. If there was any political motive in the action, he noted, "it is to correct the feudal minds".

The leader of the opposition R.N.Singh Deo, responding to such a crisis observed : "the Congress was a minority party when it formed the Ministry and it now has become unnerved. It has lost all sense of proportion and started a campaign of threats, intimidation and arrests. It has adopted utterly undemocratic methods to save the Ministry from an adverse vote. Such methods have not succeeded in other countries and they will not succeed in Orissa. People should not be demoralised and should resist the perversion of democracy".

Within a few days Mahtab thought it worthwhile to resign as he realised that it was pointless to run administration with slender majority. In his resignation letter to Governor, he observed :

"... It is a great strain to run the administration with the slender majority of about four votes in the Assembly.... We have introduced a number of taxation measures in order to raise resources for the Plan. Those measures require substantial support in the Assembly. This was one of the considerations which has been weighing with me for the last several weeks. While this is the difficulty in the Assembly here and the attitude of the CPB towards us is as I have mentioned above, it is not possible for me to continue as the Chief Minister any longer. I would request you, therefore to relieve me of office as soon as possible. About the next step, my advice to you is that the Assembly should be dissolved under Article 174 of the Constitution. This, I consider, will be in the interests of the State."

It was in this overall context that R.N.Singh Deo, the leader of the opposition met the Governor, Y.N.Sukhatankar on 10 May,

and claimed that he was in a position to form Government. But despite Mahtab's voluntary offer to resign and Singh Deo's claim to form an alternative Government the Governor was not still convinced of the capability of the latter to form an alternative Government with the required strength.

The Governor wrote back to Singh Deo on May 2, 1958 : "You will agree that I had given you ample time (till 20 May) to be able to produce satisfactory evidence about your party strength. Even after the extension of time I had granted at your request, till the 20th May had expired, you had effectively three more days for this purpose. As you had expressed reluctance to disclose the names of certain members belonging to another party, who had, according to you, given assurance of their support to form an alternative Ministry, I had asked you if you would be prepared to disclose their names to me in confidence. You have however, declined to do so on the ground that disclosure of their names even in confidence will amount to "betrayal of a sacred trust".

The Governor was still hopeful of persuading Mahtab to continue as the Chief Minister with the support of *Jharkhand* members. Mahtab, promptly accepting such a request by the Governor replied :-

"In my letter of resignation on 9 May, I suggested that in the best interest of the State, the Assembly might be dissolved. But, I know this step is not generally approved by different sections in the Legislative Assembly and also outside. You yourself also have expressed the same view. In the circumstances, I do not press that point now since the false propaganda which was being carried on by the Opposition has been thoroughly exposed now and since the Central Parliamentary Board of the Congress is satisfied that the atmosphere has been cleared, I do not press my resignation also. The resignation may be treated as withdrawn". As a result, the Governor asked him to continue in office as Chief Minister.

Politics of Coalition and Crisis

Even though the crisis facing the Mahtab Ministry was to a certain degree over, yet the political reality of the time demanded that some mechanism should be evolved for ensuring a stable Government in the State. The results of the previous elections to the State Assembly had clearly indicated that while the Congress stuck to its traditional base in the coastal districts, it was no match for the *Ganatantra Parishad* in the hill districts of Orissa. It was in this situation that Mahtab and Biju Patnaik thought of a Coalition Government by Congress and *Ganatantra Parishad*. But the proposed scheme was not readily accepted by the Central High Command. However, thanks to Biju Patnaik's strenuous efforts, the plan was approved by the Congress leadership in Delhi including the AICC. The unanimous resolve of the legislative members of Orissa Congress in favour of Coalition Government went a long way in making the Congress High Command accept the scheme.

Defending the idea of coalition and conceding the fact that *Ganatantra Parishad* was the natural representative of the tribal people, Nehru viewed that the "proposed coalition was based on the acceptance of the Congress programme and objective by the *Ganatantra Parishad*". Moreover, dispelling the pervading suspicion as to the incompatibility between the Socialist programmes of Congress and the *Rajas* who led the *Parishad*, Nehru pointed out that, "an important section of *Parishad* membership represented the *Adivasis* and not the rulers. In the past, occasions had arisen when the *Parishad* leaders had accused the Congress of not going ahead at full speed with socialist programme. ... *Prima facie* there would be no conflict between the two parties."

Both Mahtab and R.N. Singh Deo were enthusiastic about the idea of Coalition Government precisely because their respective parties stood to gain from it. Finally, the Coalition Government assumed office in May 1959 under the leadership of Mahtab. R.N. Singh Deo was inducted to the Ministry as the Finance Minister.

In their joint statement, both Mahtab and R.N.Singh Deo vowed to, "put an end to the present unstable conditions for the realisation of our cherished goal of a great and prosperous India in which Orissa will play a distinguished role".

But no sooner the Coalition Government was installed, than another built-in tension surfaced. Biju Patnaik and his associates like Biren Mitra and Nilamani Routray, who had so far functioned as pro-Mahtab group, being denied ministerial berths in the Mahtab Ministry started opposing the coalition experiment.

When differences further deepened between Mahtab and Biju on the issue of continuance of the coalition, the UPCC appointed a sub-committee to examine the question. Mahtab, who was getting worried over the increasing strength of Biju Patnaik in the Party saw in this move an attempt to remove him from Chief ministership. Promptly therefore, Mahtab drafted a letter to Congress President, N.Sanjeeva Reddy, intimating his intention to resign.

"I find myself in a position in the party where I do not think I shall be of much use either to the party or to the country. I have therefore, made up my mind to request you to kindly relieve me from the office which I hold today..."

Expressing his feelings more candidly, Mahtab wrote to Home Minister, G.B.Pant, "I have no doubt you will agree that to be engaged in seeing something done is better than only manoeuvring to keep something going. I feel unable to manage the Congress Organisation..." In November 1960, on the basis of the submission of the report of the sub-committee, the PCC resolved that "in the interest of the State and in furtherance of the best democratic tradition, the coalition Ministry should be dissolved..." Further, the PCC asked the leader of the Congress Assembly Party "to approach the Governor for President's Rule for the period between dissolution of the Ministry and the formation of the new Ministry after the General Election".

In the meantime, Biju Patnaik got himself elected as the

President of the PCC defeating Banamali Patnaik, a close follower of Mahtab. This victory of Biju in fact signalled the end of Mahtab's dominance in the Congress Legislative Party. A determined Biju by now spared no efforts to see that the Coalition Government was dissolved. Accordingly, he lobbied with the High Command to give a nod to his decision. But the High Command did not readily respond to such idea since the Congress President Sanjeeva Reddy was in favour of the procedure that the decision to end the Coalition should only be taken after the approval given by Congress Central Parliamentary Board as well as Congress Working Committee. Soon thereafter the CPB and the Congress Working Committee resolved that the Mahtab Ministry should continue as a caretaker Government till the end of the Budget Session.

Such a specific decision of the Congress High Command only helped to breed suspicion amongst the *Parishad* Leaders. And such suspicion got further strengthened when Biju talked of the formation of a single party Government under the leadership of Congress after the Coalition Ministry was dissolved.

At this juncture, Singh Deo sensing the subtle designs of Biju Patnaik towards an alternative Congress Government, threatened to stall the budget session of the Assembly by disowning responsibility for the presentation of the budget in the Assembly.

Through this strategy, Singh Deo not only succeeded in creating serious dissension between Mahtab and Biju but equally dealt a blow to Biju's ambitious idea of an alternative Government.

Fed up thoroughly with these developments, and losing interest in the coalition experiment Mahtab resigned from his office of Chief Ministership on 24 February, 1961. Thus started the phase of President's Rule in Orissa.

In an atmosphere marked by political uncertainty and the parting of the ways between Mahtab and Biju Patnaik, *Ganatantra Parishad* stood to draw maximum political mileage. In the whole course of experimenting with the Coalition Government, *Ganatantra*

Parishad and its leadership had really projected a non-controversial image with faith in democratic tradition. This image virtually helped the party to draw broad-based popular support in contrast to Congress. Side by side, it sought to weaken Congress and marginalise Mahtab politically by harping on the dispute between Mahtab and Biju Patnaik.

The process of marginalisation of Mahtab in the Congress Party circle climaxed when Mahtab quit the Congress and floated his own Party called Jana Congress in 1966.

In the mid-term poll of 1961, Congress under the leadership of Biju Patnaik registered remarkable success. Taking full advantage of the pre-poll alliance of the non-Congress parties, it could pocket nearly 43% of the total valid votes polled in the Assembly Election.

In June, 1961, Patnaik assumed the office of Chief Ministership with Biren Mitra as Deputy Chief Minister. The other close associates of Patnaik, Nilamani Routray was also taken in the Cabinet. As Chief Minister, Patnaik came to adopt a distinctly new style of administration in his eagerness to transform the backward economy of Orissa into a full-fledged industrial state. Further, enjoying a good rapport with Prime Minister Nehru, Patnaik ably succeeded to translate some of the dreams relating to socio-economic development of the State into concrete reality by establishing quite a few major projects in the State such as the Paradip Port, Sunabeda Mig Factory, Talcher Thermal Power Plant, Balimela Hydel Project, and the Express Highway.

Patnaik, however, did not continue in office for long. Congress leaders relinquished their offices in order to revamp the Congress Organisation. Biju Patnaik, who had a close rapport with Nehru and had favoured the implementation of Kamraj Plan, thought it worthwhile to step down as the Chief Minister of Orissa. By this act, he wanted to dispel the suspicion that Kamraj plan was essentially meant to protect Nehru's favourites and to remove the latter's unwanted elements. So, with the permission of Nehru,

Biju resigned from his office in August 1963. As expected, he was succeeded by Biren Mitra as Chief Minister.

At this point of time, a new political equation characterised the regional political map of Orissa. Following its poor-performance in the mid-term poll of 1961, the *Ganatantra Parishad* was weighing the prospects of its merger with the All India Swatantra Party in order to overcome the weaknesses and limitations of being an exclusively regional party. And finally, both parties got merged on 3 March 1962.

Immediately after taking over the reins of Orissa's administration, Biren Mitra made no secret about his intimate loyalty to Biju Patnaik. Declaring himself as an 'ardent follower' of Biju, Mitra announced that his Chief Ministership would signal a continuity of Governmental policies as had been enunciated by his predecessor.

Mitra's life and his style of political leadership had been quite graphically described in the following language of a contemporary: "Mitra was a popular young leader of his time affectionately called by the people of Cuttack as "Dada" (brother). He was admired by common men for his charitable disposition. Everyday he used to meet the ordinary people and listen to their grievances. To help them in their distress, Mitra used to receive money from the affluent people.

Mitra was a popular man, no doubt but administration was not his forte. He had practically brought the secretariat to the lawn of his official residence where he used to hold a 'Darbar' with common people and his officials and take important decisions. His soft attitude towards law and order issues created serious problems for him and the administration as well".

Mahtab, taking serious note of Mitra's style of running the Government, wrote to the Hon'ble Minister Gulzarilal Nanda in following terms :

"Orissa Government has been virtually converted into a business concern in which not only the top Ministers but also many officers participate. The entire administration, if allowed to go in

this way, will positively collapse sooner or later. It should be remembered that the Orissa administration is not the creation of the Orissa people; it is the creation of the Congress High Command and they should hold themselves responsible for whatever is happening here. This is just to remind you that there is a problem here which needs your urgent attention".

Side by side, Pabitra Mohan Pradhan, a Mahtab loyalist submitted a memorandum to the Congress High Command wherein he detailed the charges against the existing Ministry. Without lagging behind, the Opposition Parties also submitted a joint memorandum to the President, highlighting the blatant misuse of administration by Biju-Biren combine.

It was at this juncture that the Biren Mitra Ministry came to face massive students unrest in the State. On one occasion, nearly a hundred students forcibly entered the State Assembly premises from all sides and indulged in massive destruction of furniture and even of the chambers of some Ministers.

Shortly after this incident, Mitra's Ministry came to be again embroiled with another wave of students' unrest. Backed by the anti-Biju elements in the state including the opposition, students went on 53 day long mass strike. In this massive student movement, many students were arrested while 4 persons were killed in police firing. Agitating students displayed their anti-Biju-Biren venom by ransacking and burning houses of many of the favourite officials and Ministers of Biju Patnaik.

The fall-out effect of this massive students' unrest was thoroughly demoralising for the State Government. As a result, a fully dejected Mitra stepped down from Chief Ministership on 1 February 1965.

Following Mitra's resignation, Sadasiva Tripathy who was the Revenue, Forest and Excise Minister in Mitra's Cabinet was roped in by Biju Patnaik to take over as Chief Minister. On February, 21, 1965, Tripathy was sworn in as the Chief Minister,

defeating Pabitra Mohan Pradhan, the candidate put up by Mahtab. Pradhan could only enlist a poor 15 votes as against Tripathy's 66 votes in the election to select the CLP leader.

The downfall of Mitra Ministry in Orissa greatly encouraged the Mahtab group to further their agitation against the existing Congress Party Leadership in Orissa. In the overwhelming scenario of nation-wide anti-Congress wave, the 'oust Congress' campaign in the State gained momentum. Sadasiva Tripathy, who replaced Mitra was well-known for his uncompromising loyalty to Nabakrushna Choudhury. Mahtab succeeded in persuading Choudhury to end his quiet life in the Angul *Ashram* in favour of joining the campaign for fighting out the 'corrupt Congress'.

It was in this backdrop, the Congress came to face the General Elections of 1967. Mahtab's Jana Congress got into a pre-poll alliance with Swatantra Party on the basis of a 22 point programme. The major thrust of this alliance was to fight out Congress and to establish a clean and good Government. It also promised "ruthless elimination of corruption, favouritism and nepotism at all levels and setting up of a commission of inquiry into charges of corruption by Ministers".

The Congress thus came to suffer a serious set-back bagging only 31 seats and scoring 30.62% of total votes. On the other hand, Swatantra Party secured 49 (22.58%) seats, Jana Congress 26 seats (13.47%). These two parties together secured nearly 40% of the total votes.

Moreover, these two parties securing 75 seats, went on to form a coalition ministry with Swatantra Leader R.N.Singh Deo as the Chief Minister and Jana Congress's Pabitra Mohan Pradhan as the Deputy Chief Minister. The first major job of the Coalition Ministry, once it accepted office, was to appoint an Enquiry Commission led by Justice H.R.Khanna of Delhi High Court to probe into the charges of corruption against all the three previous Chief Ministers, namely, Biju Patnaik, Biren Mitra and Sadasiva Triphathy.

However, the Coalition Ministry could not be stable because of its inherent contradictions. The tension which afflicted the coalition stemmed from the divergent objectives of the constituent partners of the Coalition Ministry. While the Swatantra Party was in favour of the continuance of the Ministry in order to consolidate it politically in the State, Mahtab and his followers, belonging to Jana Congress, were eager to get back to the fold of original Congress at a time when Biju Patnaik seemed to have lost his clout with the Congress High Command.

After leading the Congress Party quite disastrously in the Assembly Elections, Biju Patnaik further fell from the grace of Mrs. Indira Gandhi. Because he opted to vote for the official Congress as well as syndicate candidate Sanjeeva Reddy, going against the wishes of Mrs. Gandhi, who had projected V.V.Giri and campaigned for the latter's victory under the slogan of 'Conscience Vote' during the Presidential election of 1969. Being an ace political strategist, Mahtab found it worthwhile to side with Mrs. Gandhi. Thus, the Jana Congress *en bloc* voted in favour of V.V.Giri. Ultimately Giri won and Mrs. Gandhi was all set to establish her supremacy in the Congress Party. This particular shift in political development also signalled the end of Biju's phase of honeymoon with Congress High Command since he came to be branded as pro-Reddy element by Mrs. Gandhi's Camp. Following the election Congress had to undergo a split with its far-reaching repercussion in various states. In fact, the year 1969 marked that the process of fragmentation in the Congress organisation had reached its logical conclusion. The Congress got divided into Congress (R) led by Indira Gandhi and Congress (O) led by S.Nijalingappa.

It was in this context, that Mahtab thought of returning to the Congress fold when he found that his arch political rivals like Patnaik, Mitra and Routray had formed a regional party named Utkal Congress. Soon after the split in the Orissa Congress, the Jana Congress held regular consultation with Congress (R) for its merger with the latter. A dominant chunk of Jana Congress leaders

expressed their wish in favour of withdrawing from the "unholy Swatantra-Jana Sangha Coalition". However Jana Congress leaders like Pabitra Mohan Pradhan and Surendra Nath Patnaik were not in favour of such a move. Moreover, the Chief Minister Singh Deo was equally determined to see that Mahtab failed in his strategy of withdrawing support from the coalition and thereby topple the Government.

In his bid to withdraw from the Coalition Government, Mahtab adopted several strategies. First, he raised the issue of proportionate representation for the Tribal and Harijan legislators in the Coalition Cabinet - a demand which was bound to embarrass the Swatantra leadership for accepting it meant more cabinet berths for Jana Congress Party. Second, Mahtab's idea was to withdraw from the coalition and merge with the Congress (R) since the latter had come to enjoy a massive popular support backed by a distinct pro-Indira Gandhi electoral swing in the country. Mahtab was keen on taking advantage of this favourable situation as he had fully realised that in case Jana Congress went to the polls alone or with Swatantra, it stood slender chances of winning some seats so as to be in a position to stake claim for the formation of the future ministry.

The intense popular disillusionment with the Coalition Government and equally with Jana Congress as well as the advantages associated with Congress (R) in terms of being an all-India Party with powerful resource-base made Mahtab to think like this. But Mahtab could not carry out his plan as per his design because of differing perception of Pabitra Mohan Pradhan and ten other leaders of Jana Congress, who were hardly convinced with Mahtab's logic of immediate merger with Congress (R). Instead, these leaders wanted to adopt a policy of 'Wait and Watch' before taking a final decision in regard to merger move. Pradhan was apprehensive of the fact that in case, the Jana Congress withdrew from the Coalition, the Chief Minister Singh Deo might go in for a mid-term poll or form an alternative Government alongwith the support of Biju's Utkal Congress. No consensus thus, could be

reached within the Jana Congress on the issue of merger, even though a large chunk of its leadership favoured Mahtab's line of thinking.

While political uncertainty continued, Mahtab got himself involved in the electioneering activities of the Congress (R) and had become even a member of the State Congress Election Committee, organised to monitor the Parliamentary Elections. The Pro-Mahtab group who were sympathetic to the idea of merger vehemently kept on spreading rumours as to the imminent fall of the Coalition Government and the possibility of the imposition of President's Rule.

In order to further precipitate the existing political confusion, members belonging to pro-merger group started resigning from the Coalition Government. The man who took the lead in this regard was Banamali Patnaik, who in his resignation letter to the Chief Minister on 30 December, 1970 wrote : "Jana Congress does not like to participate in the Government". Finally, on 5 January, 1971, the Deputy Chief Minister, Pradhan rushed to the residence of the Chief Minister to hand over the letter of *en bloc* resignation of the Jana Congress Ministers.

Knowing fully well that his days as the Chief Minister were over Singh Deo gracefully tendered his resignation on 9 January, 1971. The Governor in his turn, surprisingly deviating from traditional Constitutional practice of asking him to carry on the Government until alternative arrangements were made, immediately accepted Singh Deo's resignation.

This in fact created a sort of administrative crisis for a few days. In the meantime, Utkal Congress desperately attempted to form an alternative Government with conditional support of PSP but without success. The Orissa Assembly had to undergo a phase of suspended animation for a while before President's rule was imposed on January 12, 1971, with the dissolution of the Assembly. Thus was resolved the Constitutional deadlock and Orissa got geared for another round of mid-term poll.

It may be noted here that Mahtab's Jana Congress emerged primarily as a splinter group of the Congress Party in Orissa. Far from any ideological conflict, it was basically a difference in terms of approach and focus which dictated the shape of the new Party.

Moreover, on the eve of the Fourth General Elections of 1967, the political climate in India came to be characterised by a strong wave of anti-Congressism. Thus the new regional parties which came to be formed at this juncture by dissident Congress leaders held out their manifestos for the future elections in terms of a curious mix of "critiques, programmes and strategy; a blending of positive and negative overtones and ideology and practical wisdom".

Thus for Jana Congress, it was not so much of an ideological difference but the intra-party differences which made the former a reality. It is also noteworthy that the dissident Congress leaders during the November Congress Convention of 1965 had planned to organise themselves independently within the broad framework of the Congress ideology. However, their immediate objective remained in terms of establishing an alternative government defeating the Congress in Orissa. Mahtab spelt out the objective of this party in no uncertain terms when he asserted that it was their duty to do away with the existing Orissa Congress leadership which had almost demoralised the administration, spread the culture of corruption and abused the rule of law. Explaining the necessity of the formation of the new party, the official bulletin of the Jana Congress pointed out : "the origin of the organisation takes place at a historic situation of the country. Its origin however, is a consequence and not a cause".

Focusing on its programme and ideology, the official release noted that the Jana Congress emerged at a time when the country faced a critical phase in its history. According to the party's thinking, since the existing Congress Party was drifting away from its faith on Gandhian ideology, such a crisis had become inevitable. Thus while acknowledging its supreme faith on Gandhian values, the

party promised to bring back the country to the Gandhian path - a project which it sought to achieve by cooperating with other parties formed in different parts of the country, committed to Gandhian objective. The party also cited the causes of the problems like food shortages, unemployment, increasing taxes, rising prices, and failure in economic planning. While remaining critical of the fact that the socialistic ideology did not have any space to thrive in the existing Congress culture, it accused the existing Congress Government of creating conditions for enlarging the gap between the poor and the rich by pursuing a pro-capitalist policy and by manning the Government as the private property of a few self-centred persons in power.

Thus it justified that the need for the formation of an alternative Government to the Congress was a pressing necessity.

On the whole, the Jana Congress aimed at establishing a socialistic pattern of society through peaceful and democratic means founded on Gandhian ideals of social justice, individual freedom and a society free from all exploitation. The party was committed to the creation of a society in which the individual could attain the best self of his personality amidst the all round development of the region which in the final analysis, would lead to the establishment of peace and prosperity in the State.

The party in fact, promised reformation and complete overhauling of the administrative machinery, institution of enquiry commissions and committees to deal with public grievances against public officials in matters of administrative affairs, removal of misuse of power through right mechanism, corruption – free administration, quick and inexpensive administrative justice, decentralisation of power structure by strengthening Panchayat Raj System. Furthermore, it also promised good Centre-State relationship, national integration, territorial integrity of the country, secularism, political tolerance, unity of Indian culture, removal of casteism and socio-economic upliftment of the poor and backward people.

It also agreed to adopt a common minimum programme on the basis of the aforesaid aims and objectives in cooperation with other 'democratic' parties for the establishment of a clean, efficient and popular administration in the country. On the basis of this common minimum programme, the Jana Congress forged a programmatic alliance with the Orissa unit of the Swatantra Party, hitherto known as *Ganatantra Parishad*.

What was actually the nature of political developments in Orissa after 1971 in the aforesaid perspective? Let's try to map them briefly. One of the major developments after 1967 Elections was the formation of Utkal Congress which took its birth in 1970 under the leadership of Biju Patnaik. The Patnaik faction left the Congress as virtual protest against the Congress High Command's 'authoritarian' attitude. In turn this group resolved to form a "separate political apparatus disciplined and dedicated to the cause of the State".

In the General Election of 1971, the Utkal Congress thought of going it alone without seeking for any alliance. In this election, however, no party attained absolute majority; the Utkal Congress bagged 33 seats and remained the number two political party as against the principal political contestant Congress (R) which got 51 seats.

In the confusing scenario after the elections, the two prominent political adversaries - Patnaik and R.N. Singh Deo got together to form the Ministry, of course, with the support of Jharkhand Party. Thus, the Swatantra-Utkal Congress and Jharkhand United Front got a chance to rule Orissa from 22 March 1971 to 9 June 1972. This coalition Government was headed by Biswanath Das as a sort of 'Compromise Candidate' among the three political constituents namely, Swatantra, Utkal Congress and Jharkhand. But as the inherent ideological and programmatic contradictions between the coalition partners deepened, the coalition crumbled in a short period.

In the perspective of national politics, Patnaik attempted

rapprochement with the Congress High Command secretly with the hope that Mrs. Gandhi would permit him to head a Congress-Utkal Congress Coalition in Orissa. But in the meantime, Mrs. Nandini Satpathy who was in the Union Ministry started showing her keen interest in Orissa politics with a pronounced anti-Patnaik attitude. She saw to it that Utkal Congress *en bloc* never merged with Congress. She was however willing to take back all Utkal Congress Members individually except of course Biju Patnaik. Taking advantage of this situation Nilamani Routray, one of the close associates of Patnaik, took the lead in negotiating with top Congress leadership. Routray was backed in his efforts by a section of Utkal Congress Members. Biju Patnaik did not oppose this move as this would have meant swimming against the tide as sizeable section of Utkal Congress members were enthusiastic to join Congress. Further, he clearly understood that he had slender chance of regaining his political supremacy even though Utkal Congress merged with Congress due to the emergence of Mrs. Satpathy as the favourite leader of Mrs. Gandhi.

In such circumstances on 9 June, 1972, Utkal Congress withdrew support from the coalition and opted to go back to Congress. While making this move, the party explained that the home coming was necessary in order "to strengthen the hands of the Prime Minister to carry out her declared objective of socialist growth and to bring up the backward areas like Orissa to the national mainstream". As a result of this, the Biswanath Das led Coalition Government resigned on that very day, 9 June, 1972. And, on 14 June 1972, Mrs. Nandini Satpathy came to head a Congress Government on the basis of the strength given by the recently merged Utkal Congress Members.

This Government, however, came to be characterised by its in-built tension from the very beginning. First of all, owing to Mrs. Satpathy's insistence, Biju Patnaik and his close associates were not allowed entry into the Congress Party nor was any Utkal Congress Member either nominated to the PCC or to its Executive Committee.

Consequently, the Utkal Congress members in the Congress demanded the inclusion of all Utkal Congress members including Biju Patnaik in Congress, adequate and proper representation of the Utkal Congressmen in the Cabinet and other bodies. Further, they pressed the demand for an assurance of getting party tickets in the coming election.

When no such assurance was forthcoming from Mrs. Satpathy's end, the General Body Meeting of the Utkal Congress (12 November, 1972) rejected the earlier joint resolution of Party's Executive and Legislative Body of 9 June effecting the merger of the party with the Congress. A jubilant Biju Patnaik went on record saying that the "party was only dormant, not dead".

It was in this context, Utkal Congress was again revived in November 1972 and on 18 November Utkal Congress Legislative Party including Biju Patnaik and his close associates regrouped to elect Patnaik as the Leader of the Party.

Interestingly, this development took shape when Mrs. Satpathy was seeking election to Orissa Assembly from Cuttack through a bye-election. Patnaik obviously supported his close associate Biren Mitra who contested as an independent candidate against Satpathy. The Congress High Command, in such situation, thought of winning over Patnaik by persuading him to reconsider the merger of Utkal Congress with Congress. But, Patnaik remained indifferent and this in fact signalled his final break with the Congress.

Another important development which took shape during this period was that Mahtab who had dissolved his regional outfit Jana Congress to join Congress before 1971, kept himself dissociated from Satpathy's electoral campaign (who was seeking bye - election from Cuttack) despite the fact that the former had a tremendous clout as a leader in Cuttack city.

It is worth-noting that Mahtab who had merged his Jana Congress with the Congress and had subsequently replaced Binayaka Acharya as the leader of the Congress Legislative Party,

had also attempted to head Congress Government with the support of Utkal Congress. But his plans had been dashed to ground after the emergence of Mrs. Satpathy as the hot favourite of Mrs. Gandhi. Soon after Mrs. Satpathy took over the charge of Chief Ministership, Mahtab had undertaken the move of a secret signature campaign against her leadership. This situation pushed Nilamani Routray, (a disillusioned Utkal Congress leader who had taken the lead for the merger of Utkal Congress with Congress and subsequently had felt betrayed) to take up the banner of revolt against Satpathy's leadership when the latter was facing the bye-election.

Thus it was not only Biju Patnaik and Routray who had their scores to settle with Mrs. Sathpathy but the more powerful and more famous political heavyweight Mahtab got reunited in the face of political expediency with his political adversaries of yesteryears to defeat Mrs. Satpathy.

The emergence of Patnaik-Mahtab-Routray axis came to influence the future politics of Orissa in a significant manner. Eventhough Mrs. Satpathy was elected comfortably in the Cuttack bye-election, she could hardly consolidate her leadership in the State. Her stint as Chief Minister came to be massively affected by factional infighting. To cap it all, Nilamani Routray resigned from Satpathy Ministry on 1 March, 1973 and in a quick simultaneous move, Mrs. Satpathy equally asked the Governor to drop Routray from the Cabinet. But thereafter, she tendered her own resignation and President's rule was clamped down on Orissa on 3 March 1973.

Quite interestingly, a new political realignment surfaced in Orissa after the fall of Nandini Ministry. Mahtab who had practically distanced and dissociated himself from Congress after the virtual emergence of Mrs. Satpathy as the Party's leader, went ahead to form an "Independent Congress Group" in the State Assembly for which he was suspended from the Congress Party. Biju Patnaik who was denied entry into Congress solely due to Mrs. Satpathy and Nilamani Routray who felt cheated after

rejoining Congress had no other option but to revive their own Utkal Congress Party.

And as such, R.N.Singh Deo's Swatantra could have hardly reconciled to Congress ideology. Thus Mahtab, Patnaik and Singh Deo, shedding all their earlier differences floated the United Front of the Utkal Congress and the Swatantra and the Independent Congress group led by Mahtab. Later on the SSP also joined this front. This new political formation afterwards came to be known as Orissa Pragati Party.

Justifying the formation of such a Front under the broad label of Pragati Party, Biju Patnaik maintained that such a front based on the unity of parties and individuals believing in democracy, parliamentarianism and social justice was meant to offer resistance against any undemocratic and totalitarian trend towards dictatorship. Moreover he was hopeful that such a front would signal the beginning of initiatives to bring about a "national democratic front at the Centre as a viable alternative to the totalitarian clique".

In the 1974 Elections, the Pragati Party emerged as the main contestant of Congress. In the meantime, Congress had sought alliance with CPI to counter the Pragati Party. Despite its big claims, Pragati Party largely remained a pre-electoral alliance of the Utkal Congress, the Swatantra and the SSP. The political constituents under the Pragati Party only agreed to be partners without losing their distinct identities just before the Election. Thus these constituents retained their own Party symbols and went to the polls. In the Election however, Congress emerged as the largest single block winning majority of seats. Congress which won 69 seats out of a total 147 with the support of CPI and the independents formed the Ministry under the leadership of Mrs.Nandini Satpathy. The Nandini Ministry took office on 6 March 1974.

However in the aftermath of 1974 Elections, the major constituents of Pragati Party as well as several other parties of different States having different ideological persuasion reached a consensus that the non-Congress Parties should unite together

under the broad-based platform so as to evolve as a national opposition to the Congress Party. This specific thinking was concretised when Charan Singh, the leader of Bharatiya Kranti Dal announced the formation of Bharatiya Lok Dal on 21 July.

So naturally, Pragati Party in Orissa came to be known as Lok Dal towards the end of 1974 before it finally merged into the Janata Dal alongwith several other constituents like Congress (O) and Socialist Party in early 1977.

The Nandini Ministry meanwhile, in Orissa lasted till 1976 followed by Binayaka Acharya who headed a short-term Congress Ministry for four months. However, in the wake of the defeat of Mrs. Gandhi and Congress in the Parliamentary elections, Acharya resigned in April, 1977.

It was during this period however, Mahtab assumed the front-ranking role of an enraged critic vis-a-vis Mrs. Gandhi and her Emergency. More importantly, Mahtab had spelt out his preference in no uncertain term regarding his distancing from active politics around April, 1975. And he stuck to his position consistently till the end of his life in 1987. But what is crucial about Mahtab during this phase is the fact that he steadfastly kept on voicing his views for the masses of the society with a perspective which neatly combined the elements of a committed democrat, a socialist and a staunch Gandhian.

Any critical analysis of *Gaan Majlis*, Mahtab's regular column in the *Prajatantra* during this phase points to Mahtab's perceptions of wide-ranging issue and problems of the contemporary nation, state and society quite brilliantly.

Particularly, his writings in the Post-1974 phase assumed sharper focus on varieties of issues. We can now turn our attention to a few selected columns of *Gaan Majlis* to get a feel of Mahtab's thinking during the penultimate phase of his life.

MAHTAB: A PIONEER OF RURAL AWARENESS

One of the striking aspects of Mahtab's personality was that despite his multifaceted political and administrative engagements, he continuously kept writing for the *Prajatantra*, his own newspaper. Right since 1947 - 48, he wrote regularly for the *Prajatantra* under the column *Gaan Majlis*. This column was however withdrawn from the *Prajatantra* during 1975 - 76 due to the imposition of Emergency by Mrs. Indira Gandhi. In fact, *Gaan Majlis* was so popular as a regular column of the *Prajatantra* amongst the people of Orissa that people in the remote villages used to update their information regarding the day to day developments concerning politics, economy and society facing the nation as well as the state through this column which was being written in a lucid and heart-touching language. The column appealed to the sensibilities of the common man in an extraordinary manner.

Explaining the very objective of this column, Mahtab himself wrote : " The basic idea of *Gaan Majlis* is to encourage the common man to participate in the discussion of any issue, be it economic or political or social. This column is drafted keeping in view the fact that as if the writer himself is sitting and discussing the issues with common people of the villages; even though the villagers are devoid of formal college or university level education, they have the capability of grasping the issues as well as articulating their opinions. *Gaan Majlis* is basically intended to

regenerate this particular spirit."¹

Gaan Majlis also to a considerable extent, mirrors the contemporary political scenarios of Orissa. Mahtab being one of the top political leaders of the state and the nation utilised this column to reflect his political commentary.

It is in this context, one can critically evaluate Mahtab's nature of engagement with public activities by locating properly his ideas concerning society, economy and polity as expressed in this column.

Around 1971, Mahtab sought to justify the quitting of Jana Congress from the Coalition Ministry led by Mr. Rajendra Narayan Singh Deo of the Swatantra Party. In this connection, he observed :

" The withdrawal of Jana Congress from the Coalition Ministry is a major development. In fact, it would have been better if the former would have snapped its tie with the latter much earlier. I am also very much responsible for the Coalition Ministry (Congress and Singh Deo's *Ganatantra Parishad* Coalition) of 1959 in the past. I am today being blamed for doing this. Even those people who joined this Coalition and benefited from it, are equally blaming me. However, the explanation for that coalition are here to judge. Politics has a deep connection so as to be pragmatic. This has been my reading and experience of politics. Orissa is a new province. 1936 marked the first phase of this new province while 1948 its second phase. It is worth recalling the process through which the princely states were merged into Orissa during the second phase. It was during this phase also the Hirakud Dam was constructed. Because of these two issues such as merger of princely states and Hirakud Dam construction that the Western Orissa witnessed a massive popular agitation. At that point of time, the only daily newspaper of Orissa fully championed the cause of this movement and created a serious problem for me. After 1936,

1. H.K. Mahtab, *Gaan Majlis* Vol. I, P.1, 1977, Cuttack

when the Orissa Province was created, a distinctly divided feeling of the people of North Orissa and South Orissa surfaced. It was therefore, for this reason that we few raised the demand that somebody from South Orissa should be the Chief Minister of Orissa and accordingly supported a candidate. Likewise, we also felt that somebody from Western Orissa should be the Chief Minister. But the way, North-South Orissa adjusted to each other in the sphere of politics, Western Orissa failed to cope with. Despite several efforts, we failed to do that. It was in this context, once again a Coalition Ministry became a necessity. We knew that this arrangement of Coalition Ministry had certain limitations. But, we were equally sure that such limitations would be overcome in due course of time. If the people of Western Orissa can not elect people from the common strata then it would be really disastrous to involve people, those who have been selected by the *Raja* in the administration. Earlier, the *Ganatantra Parishad* had members like Sradhakar Supakar or Godavarisha Babu. Gradually these people left the Party. Today, this party is rechristened as Swatantra Party. Swatantra Party is definitely a political party. It has its connection with democracy. But the Swatantra Party of Orissa is a party whose members have been chosen by the king. It had no connection with democracy. The only objective of the Swatantra Party of Orissa is to re-establish princely rule. We won't allow this to happen. People won't allow that. This might require a bloody revolution; but this trend has to be resisted. The Swatantra Party is really untouchable for the people in Orissa as it is a party of the king. The Chief Ministership of Mr. Rajendra Narayan Singh Deo for the last four years has really proved it . . . Let nobody vote for the Swatantra Party in the ensuing election. Let it be considered as an untouchable party socially, let alone in the sphere of politics. Only when it is liberated from the clutches of the royal elements, then only it can enjoy the status of a recognised political party with whom interaction can be possible. The other parties really should unite sincerely so as to fight out this party having a feudal and royal orientation."

Reflecting his disillusionment about the post - independent Indian social structure, Mahtab voiced strongly in favour of a total overhauling of the existing social system. In fact , in one of his editorials, he pointed out, " Self - willed change is peaceful; but change attained under compulsion implies violent revolution. When the inevitable and logical necessity for change is resisted, and if not done voluntarily, then this is bound to result in violent explosion which finally gives way for changes. . . This has happened in France and Russia. Similarly, whenever the ruling class in India had refused to accept the required change despite indication, the foreign powers have taken advantage of the situation and brought in the necessary changes. This has been the internal weakness of the Indian social system. . . .

After the achievement of Swaraj, Indian People have got the power to vote and form Government. Till date, this has been the only political benefit the Indians have got.

This benefit is no small achievement. In many developed countries, the practice of mass voting has been introduced after hundreds of years. It is worth noting that whereas the tribals of Koraput and Vishakhapatna have got the right to vote, the same class of tribals in America and Australia are yet to get the very right. Therein lies the uniqueness of the Indian Constitution.

But beyond this right, there is equally a need for certain other changes which are yet to be achieved. Despite the sensitivity and sympathy of Indian Constitution for these changes, the Constitution is yet to make concrete provisions for such changes. The Indian Constitution has been framed mostly in the light of British Parliamentary system. The countries which have adopted Parliamentary system of democracy have undergone the stage of industrial revolution alongwith the necessary shifts in socio - economic developments. The first stage is the primitive condition which is followed by industrial revolution and decline of feudal system. Where capitalists can not be controlled properly, there is the need to have the third stage which spells the end of capitalism

and the growth of socialism. Britain and America are still in the second stage. It is generally believed in these countries that there is no need for the third stage. But in India, the socio - economic structure is still in the primitive state.

Despite industrialisation and the growth of required administrative structure, the primitive stage appears to have attained a *status quoist* position which in fact blocks its transformation to the second stage For example, even if there are distinct provisions for irrigation and supply of drinking water, if the landed elements refuse to part with a piece of land, then it amounts to negating the real process of development. Similarly, the oppressive feudal practices which are still in operation in many villages only points to the increasing helplessness of the administration to fully protect the interests of the deprived sections of the society . . . In such a society, British pattern of administration and its Constitution only helps to reinforce the primitive stage of the Indian Society."²

Commenting on Mrs. Indira Gandhi, Mahtab wrote :

" When there is widespread popular discontent against the *status quo* existing in the country, a ray of hope has been given by Mrs. Gandhi. Rajagopalachari may call her a child, and the contemporaries of Nehru would like to dub her as a girl ; or somebody may ignore her saying that she is a woman; yet the courage with which she rescued Congress from the clutches of a group of vested interests who had been dominating Congress points to her 'manliness'. The 1967 General Election was in fact a challenge to that particular vested interests under the label of the so-called 'Syndicate'. Because of the 'Syndicate', Congress rule in nine provinces of India really ended.

At that time, Mrs. Gandhi was a real prisoner of the ideas advocated by the Syndicates. She also came to Orissa to muster support for the Syndicate. I had in fact discussed extensively with Mrs. Gandhi as to how to save Congress from the influence

of the 'Syndicate'. But Mrs. Gandhi had expressed her helplessness. Then we really believed that Congress could not be revamped organisationally or ideologically. People thought that the historic role of Congress was over. However, finally Mrs. Gandhi came forward to save Congress. She became the symbol of change. . .

In the life of a nation or an institution, a phase of transition is bound to come. At any point of transition, he who greets and accepts changes and is prepared to face all the hurdles, emerges as the real leader subsequently. This has really happened with Mrs. Gandhi. Even if somebody is jealous about Mrs. Gandhi, and nurtures enmity against her, history will definitely admit that she has really saved Congress at a time of crisis and has really given the people of the country hopes for change. . .

In fact, the impasse in the spheres of politics, economy and military affairs has been continuing right since 1961 - 62. This had really given the impression that the country could hardly overcome such a stagnation. But, the situation has been retrieved considerably. That a much younger lady like Mrs. Gandhi could successfully challenge the much older leaders has been the real cause of jealousy and anger against her. That is why many alliances are being forged against her. But no such alliance has the objective in terms of bringing about a change in the existing social structure. The only objective of such alliances is to oust Mrs. Gandhi which in other words suggests that they are not prepared to accept any change. In fact, if change is badly needed, then there must be debate about the mode and nature of change. But the question which is more pertinent now is whether we will accept change or stick to the *status quo*. Mrs. Gandhi is the symbol of change whereas the opposition pitted against her is in favour of *status quo*. That is why, Mrs. Gandhi enjoys widespread popular support. Let the wishes of the people prevail".

Reflecting on Gandhi and socialism Mahtab pointed out : "The objectives of Gandhism and Marxism, are the same. Gandhi infact, preached the same view which socialism implied. He not only campaigned his views but really inspired the whole nation for

sometime. Those who are interested to know more about Gandhi and socialism should read Gandhi's book published by Navjeevan Publisher, titled *Towards Non-violent Socialism*. . . The writings and the speeches of Gandhi have been edited and the thought of Gandhi has been noted as follows :

" The big names of recent history, Churchill, Roosevelt, Lloyd George, Stalin, Lenin, Hitler, Woodrow Wilson, the Kaiser, Lincoln, Napoleon, Matternich, Tallyrand, etc. had the power of States at their disposal. The only non official figure comparable to Gandhi in his effect on Men's mind is Karl Marx. . .

From time immemorial, people in general have been exploited by a handful section of vested interests. . . That is why the struggle has been going on to fight out these illegality and injustice. In order to end this process, Karl Marx had developed the method of socialism. Gandhi had really used a different language to achieve that very socialism in order to formulate laws for building a non-violent society. Gandhi for sometime could create the belief that without resorting to violence and consequent destruction that the heart of human being can be changed and people can live happily by helping one another. We should really think to-day how far such ideals have been put into practice.

As a matter of rule, Karl Marx had urged the people to take up ongoing struggle against exploitation. On the other hand, Gandhi had given the call to the exploiters to desist themselves from exploiting others and instead to contribute their mite for the good of the people. That people should not possess wealth more than what they require and that they should not have necessities beyond what a common man requires in a society was the appeal of Gandhi to the privileged rich classes.

This appeal had indirectly helped to create consciousness among the poorer classes. Gandhi was opposed to violent struggles. He had really proved that a non-violent struggle could be quite powerful and effective. Yet, he hoped that in order to save the exploited of the society, the state had a greater role to play. In

the book *Towards Non-violent socialism*, he has stressed the point.

A government that does not ensure this much is no government. It is anarchy. Such a state should be resisted peacefully.

From his remarks, it is clearly evident that the responsibility of the state is to fulfil the genuine demands of the people. In case the state fails to perform this duty, the bounden duty of the people is to struggle against the state.

It has been seen in the last twenty five years that the appeal of Gandhi to the conscience of the rich classes has not been effectively practised; out of a thousand, not a single man who has earned a lot of wealth has been willing to distribute his surplus income for the cause of the people, thereby preferring to lead a common man's life. On the other hand, the state has to fight against the influence of the money power. Under this situation there is no other alternative but to appeal to the people to lead a struggle against such exploitation. If this struggle remains peaceful then the practical value of Gandhism can be justified, otherwise not.

Gandhi was emphatic on the point that no 'ism' justifies itself through talks or advice. One has to translate the ideas of any 'ism' to concrete action in order to justify the very 'ism'.

In an editorial titled " Engine and Oil ", Mahtab observed about the role of money in managing political parties in the following way.

" . . . Gandhi used to lament that the efforts of Congress organisation to collect four anna from its members in order to manage the party proved futile as the party finally banked upon the finance of the rich to run itself. Gandhi considered this development as really unfortunate. Since Gandhi was treated as *Mahatma* his personality was never influenced by money. But after independence, when the political parties have taken up the programmes of economic activities and when there is a virtual absence of personalities like Gandhi, it is not surprising that money will continue to influence

political parties. It has been a common feature of the political parties which are elected to rule to collect money while in power. As democratic tradition in India has not been fully strengthened and due to the prevalence of overall poverty of the people, those who collect money for the parties tend to collect money for themselves. This situation has been so acute that it has raised suspicion as to the survival of the existing democracy and in case it survives, how far it can be able to redress the grievances of the people at large. . . .

what is the remedy ?

. . . In Britain, the labour party protects the interests of the workers. The conservative party guards the interests of the capitalists.

In America also, the two parties clearly and respectively safeguard the two organised interests. There is nothing secret or confidential about it. Once upon a time, the Congress Party used to protect the interests of the Indian Industry vis - a - vis the foreign industries. It so happened that once Motilal Nehru openly proclaimed in the Parliament that he has collected Rs. 1 Lakh as donation from the Tatas for "Steel Protection". As far as Indian Industrial interest was concerned party funding is done usually in this manner.

Today, socialism has been an avowed policy with both Congress and many other parties. As per this policy, it is no more possible to represent the interests of the capitalist classes, who stand for industry and commerce. Thus it is better to collect money from peasants and workers. However, one can not spend lavishly by collecting money from peasants and workers. An organisation like Congress can never remain sincere and committed if it does not work hard and learn to spend the minimum by imposing rigorous discipline in the party. . . ."

Commenting on the Constitutional amendments namely the state's right over private property and abolition of privy purse of the rulers, Mahtab termed such changes in the Constitution as

fundamental and which indicated that the country was ready for a 'new age'. In connection with these amendments, however, he noted :

"... To organise public opinion is the major responsibility of Congress. The public opinion should be organised firmly in favour of a secular socialist state so that no vested interests can dilute this objective at any point of time.

In fact, the Indian tradition is to first resist and in case the resistance fails, then to finally accept. But after accepting the idea, when the opportunity arises, the tendency is to give up the idea. In the remote past, Budhism as a religion had been opposed, yet subsequently Buddha has been recognised as God and finally the very religion has been given a good-bye. Similarly, in the recent past, Gandhi had been opposed before he was recognised as top leader. But, finally Gandhism has been given up. There is a particular class in the society who in order to protect its own interests does not resist reforms till the end but accepts it midway before disowning it finally.

In other words what they do is to give up those reforms, which have been effected and impose the old order in its place. Everyone should be aware of such elements".

In an editorial titled *New Judgement of the New Age*, Mahtab strongly pleaded for an economically prosperous and socialist India. He thus observed :

"The honeymoon of independence is now over. Now it is the time to discharge the responsibility. The current problem is that how the general masses in India will understand about this shift in the national objective. This new idea of a new age should reach the rural India as quickly as the message of Gandhian non-cooperation reached the villages of India. As a principal political organisation, the responsibility of Congress is to undoubtedly ensure that it has to strive hard braving strong opposition to attain the very objective. India has to acquire economic power at any cost ".

On the 25th year of Indian Independence, Mahtab recalled his memory of the day of 15 Aug. 1947 in the following words :

"The dark of the night was all over. The all-smiling morning of the reddish eastern sky announced, 'A new age in Indian history has dawned'. The people in the Cuttack city were awake right since midnight. Demonstration, music , the voice of nationalist spirit and sincerity, the blowing of conch-shells and the beating of drums accompanied by loud shouts all combined were visibly manifested in the overall happiness of the people of Cuttack town who seemed to chase the night of 14 August, 1947.

I spent some restless moments in my official quarter inside the Barabati Fort. I proceeded towards Dr. Kailash Nath Katju's residence. Sun was yet to rise. Dr. Katju was staying in the historic Lalbag area. He was strolling happily in the compound of his house. He was overwhelmed with joy to see me and clasped my hand and embraced me. In a voice choked with emotion, he said, "Mahtab Sahib, after how many centuries?" I replied instantly, "after a thousand years". We sat down to re-open the chapters of history through our chit-chat. Right since 11th Century, the whole race became indifferent to politics. In the subsequent times, the people laboured under the impression that they did not have to do anything for the country nor they could do it. Further, what they believed was that they had to remain under the bondage of the ruling state and the *Nawabs*.

May be, it was Mahatma Gandhi who dispelled this notion through his magic touch to Indian politics. The *Rajas*, the *Nawabs* or the community of educated elites hardly played any role in this affair. Rather, the educated people grouped together to keep away from the mass movement. While ruminating over the specifics of Indian history, we were amply reminded of Gandhi and tears came to our eyes. How could he change the course of history in such a short span of time?

. . . In the evening an one act play was staged in the town.

The title of the play was *India through the Ages*. Mr. Sachin Dutta and myself selected the theme of this play, but Mr. Dutta had penned the script. The Governor and myself spoke on that occasion. In the last scene of the play, a boy appeared on the stage and asked the audience, "Can you recognise me ? Can you remember me ? There is no need to recall me. I did not expect this. Without hoping for any result, I smilingly sacrificed my life; I am Khudiram. You need not recall my name. But, today is the happiest day for me. Because, my sacrifice has not gone in vain".

The boy spoke in such a manner that I was overwhelmed by his utterances. In fact, I was reminded of the martyrs who gave up their lives for the cause of independence. I simply cried and left the hall. Throughout the night, that one sentence kept reverberating in my ears, "Can you recall me?"

I asked myself, "Have we really remembered them?" The very next day, we prepared a scheme to help the deprived political workers and immediately implemented the scheme. Money was granted for constructing a Memorial Hall for the martyrs in Cuttack. A provision was made to install the photographs of the martyrs in the Hall, who were killed during the freedom struggle or by the bullets of police. But is that sufficient?

From remote, interior villages we have been receiving the news that people were celebrating the day of 15th August in their own ways. Even in far-off Koraput, the tribals were dancing and shouting the slogan that Gandhi *Maharaja* has become the king of *Bharat* and their days of hunger and poverty were over. It was not only the tribals but all sections of people in the society who spontaneously came to believe that like a bad dream of the last night, all their woes would vanish on the very morning of 15 August and the age of happiness and prosperity would usher in from the very morning itself. The very feeling and expectations were equally evident with the people when they were involved in the independence struggle.

The hopes really moved like mountains and we thought then that we had really achieved something substantial. But after 25 years when I look back, I ask myself, have we strenuously tried to fulfil the expectations of such people? Of course, the glory of the achievement of independence partly answers this question. But for the millions who are still rotting under misery and excruciating agonies, only independence for them bears no meaning. They have in fact lost faith in themselves.

What sort of self-confidence they have attained ? Do they realise that this country belongs to them and the responsibility of shaping their own destinies entirely depends on their own initiatives ? The answers to the above questions depend on the review of the history of last 25 years. The self-confidence and determination of the masses were the real yardsticks to measure the progress of the nation as well as to map the notion of independence. Because, it is the masses who have attained independence and the responsibility to sustain this also depends on them".

Mahtab was opposed to those who sought to reject the demands such as Orissa for Oriyas, Bengal for Bengalis and Maharashtra for Maharastrians. He held that the idea to suppress such demands was both ethically and practically wrong. In this connection, he observed :

"The law of the nation is that every province should develop themselves so as to ensure the prosperity of the provincial people. Similarly, the international law is that all nations should safeguard their own national interests and thus remain healthy.

. . . If Orissa is not for Oriyas, Bengal not for Bengalis, Madras not for Madrasi, then India can not be considered as a place for Indians. As the village is for villagers; the province is for the provincial people and the nation for the people of the nation."

Commenting on Mrs. Indira Gandhi's alleged intolerance for criticism, Mahtab observed in an editorial dt. 21-4-73 that:

" . . . The rulers are always expected to be quite tolerant; but it is presumed from some of the speeches of Mrs. Gandhi that she is not prepared to listen to any kind of criticism against her. Even she is not prepared to tolerate the critics. Stalin in fact did like this once upon a time. The whole world then condemned him and for him only, the ideology of communism earned notoriety. To correct such tendencies within Marxism, efforts have been going on there but with no success.

Is Indira Gandhi heading the same way like Stalin? I personally feel that because of the pressure of the problems she hardly finds time to think silently over any issue. She does not even know to what level, these flatterers will push her ultimately. Surrounded by group of flatterers, anybody can feel like an all powerful person and s / he even hardly hesitates to give order to the sea as king Canute did. It is a pity that Mrs. Gandhi has reached such a position.

. . . The price of rice has gone up. *Atta* is not available. People are facing lot of difficulties. If it is brought to the notice of the authorities, people are scolded, such as " the reactionary people are obstructing the development of the nation ". Mrs. Indira Gandhi is saying that the critics will be 'finished' as a result of which there will be nobody to speak anymore and with unlimited power and privilege some people will carry on their autocratic rule. But such a trend has never continued for long anywhere. In democracy particularly, this has not been a success. . .

The Government have police, army and it can shoot and kill the starving people, if they shout. But the poor man has power in his breath which can violently destroy the big powers of the world. One has to listen to the demands of the people and redress their grievances. The voice of dissent is heard and debated not only in democracy but equally in Communist parties also. The move to suppress dissent in a democracy can never succeed. . .

Every thinking individual of different classes of the society whether s / he is in politics or not should clearly notice the trend

of the politics of the nation today and the way it is heading for."

Mahtab during January, 1974, in an editorial captioned as *Why Pragati Party* spelt out the need and objective of the Pragati Party, his own brainchild which was formed basically in opposition to the ruling Congress. In the editorial he pointed out:

"Pragati Party is not the political formation, what one generally understands by a political party. This party does not have its own members. This Party is the combination of different parties. The reason for this combination is to redress the contemporary economic and political crisis which have afflicted India. The fact of the matter is that in other countries, effective steps are being taken to remedy the crisis but here in India, attempts are being made to wish away the crisis Here, if somebody cries because of a severe pain, it is assumed the person is pretending. The Congress leadership laughs away at such cries, blaming the opposition as responsible for such crisis.

There is acute food shortage backed by high rise in prices. . . . Even if people have ration cards there is no commodity in the shop.

Even if Congress is in majority in both the centre and the states, police and army are being used to maintain law and order. The inner party struggle is equally responsible for the breakdown of law and order.

Strikes, lock-outs in many Government and semi-Government organisations have become usual. There is also no stability in the educational front. It is in this situation, the states are exerting maximum pressure on the Centre to attract its attention. In fact the leadership has lost the confidence of the people and in order to survive, it resorts to various kinds of tactics. The people no more believe the present leadership. In Communist countries, the policies and programmes of the party are forcibly imposed on the people. But, Congress is hardly a party as it is understood in

Communist countries. Here the party is run according to the wishes of a particular leader and attempts are being made to impose the wishes of that particular leader in the name of the party. To correct this state of affairs, one needs to resist such attempts face to face. This is the only alternative available, if the crisis is to be remedied non-violently. Those political parties or the individuals who oppose dominance and autocracy by an individual and those who believe in the people in order to ensure progress of the country have started coming together, establishing coordination among themselves in the shape of the particular political platform called Pragati Party. It does not mean that effective coordination has totally been established in all the parties; however amongst certain parties, coordination has been fully established. Attempts are afoot to establish full coordination among other parties and it is hoped that such understanding among various parties will be fully established. The Pragati Party will fight the next election in this particular role. . . ."

On 6th February, 1974, in an editorial titled *Election issue*, Mahtab focused on the performances of Mrs. Gandhi's Government between 1971-1974. In this piece he observed :

"That the administration has remained indifferent and insensitive to the above cause have been adequately proved from the massive disillusionment of the Government employees leading to strikes, labour unrest in the Government-controlled industries and the acute administrative crisis . . . The mass unrest in Gujarat today will definitely be repeated in other places . . ."

During April , 1974 , Mahtab urged the people to raise their voice against the 'oppressive rule' of Mrs. Gandhi. In an editorial *That era will not return*, he pointed out :

". . . Gandhi was a political leader and in his times, he was the greatest political leader. One has to examine his methods of struggle from a political perspective. Some of the major elements of Gandhian political strategy were :

(1) A non-violent struggle was more effective than a violent

struggle. (2) People's co - operation was quite essential in a non - violent struggle. (3) Non-violence is a dynamic power . . . (4) One has to resist non-violently. If non-violence fails, then violent resistance must follow since resistance is inevitable. (5) When both the sides resort to violent means, in such a context, it is absolutely futile to advise a particular side to stick to non-violence. If a particular side is not prepared to accept advice regarding non-violence, then it is illegal and unjustified to condemn the other side for violent activities.

The way the smouldering discontentment is assuming momentum among the people of the country today, it needs to be given a right direction.

Moreover in order to redress the grievance, the people need to be kept prepared for a larger struggle. But this movement needs to be confined within the limits of non-violence as far as possible. If the ruling party adopts massive violence, then the unarmed people should keep their cool and should desist from using counter - violence, but even then, if some stray cases of violent activities take place, then the people should not be condemned. This exactly happened in 1942. Whenever the ruling party talks of non-violence, it ultimately means that the starving people should continue to sleep starved without any protest.

It is quite impossible on the part of the oppressive rule to punish or condemn those leaders who have given vent to the popular discontentment. It is moreover an 'unpardonable offence' in the case of a representative Government. Gandhiji has also talked about the need to organise popular movements in the context of representative Government. Thus, that the popular discontentment will not be given the right shape by the leadership and that people will simply tolerate and continue to remain peaceful against the mounting spree of oppression - this era is gone. The era which was known for such toleration by the people will not return any more."

Yet in another editorial, Mahtab tried to explain how mass

discontentment against Mrs. Gandhi's rule had bred violent attitude on the part of the people. At a subtle level, this can be seen as Mahtab's conscious efforts to mobilise popular opinion for a 'war' against the contemporary state. In this piece, he remarked :

"Today, the Government is reminded of Gandhi. The government equally feels the necessity to remember Vinoba. . . people were suppressed in the name of religion in the past, but people can't be suppressed in the name of Gandhian non-violence any more. It is a truth that violent tendencies are on the rise in the country. The reason for this is economic discrimination. A few people in the country, who are spending lavishly to enjoy life are advising the people at large to bear with the sufferings of life. This attitude is so irritating that, 'violence' will definitely take root in popular mentality. Those who possess little bit of power, have turned so much egoistic that they care a fig for others."

Elaborating on the idea of Jayaprakash, who sought to organise an all India non-violent protest vis-a-vis Mrs. Gandhi's 'misrule', Mahtab wrote on 8 June , 1974.

". . . People of India were given high hopes as well as inspiration through big talks and promises. However, it was proved that the sacrifice and commitment required to be displayed in order to fulfil these hopes were in fact lacking in the leadership. When popular expectation could not be fulfilled, it led to intense popular discontentment. Various methods were resorted to suppress these discontentment. But the leadership is not ready to accept this and it tries to be in power by any means be it through manipulation or force. The situation worsened to such an extent that a sizeable section of youth took to knife, revolver and guns and organised themselves to redress their grievances ; on the other hand, the armed police and army took to rifles and stenguns to suppress these activities. . . In the violent battle between these two parties, the masses in general were only left helpless and frustrated. In the face of the terror of the State, the violence of any non-Governmental

organisation was no match. This was quite clearly proved. Now what is the way out? The economic crisis is assuming dangerous proportions. Instead of attempting to remove the causes of the popular discontentment, an all-out effort is on to suppress the discontentment. The newly imposed MISA (Maintenance of Internal Security Act), tries to create an undue impression regarding the necessity of such laws even when India remains a peaceful and non-violent country. Eventhough it is not ordinarily imagined it has become so usual that nobody thinks it to be quite unusual. When a system based on repressive laws appears usual, people tend to get disillusioned. It is as if somebody who is lost in the darkness and fails to decide where to go and which path to opt for. This kind of situation in fact, occurred in this country fifty years ago.

Today, Jayaprakash has shown the light in an atmosphere of sheer helplessness. The attempt by Jayaprakash to express the discontentment in a non-violent way and to seek its redressal in the same way has really begun from Bihar. Bihar is to be built anew. And to do this, he has appealed to the students to boycott College and University education for a year. He has also decided to launch the programme of boycotting legislative assembly. He of course, himself admits that such a programme is opposed to the existing Constitutional norms. But he says that it is not anti-democracy and such a view is justified. In fact, under pressure of circumstances, a democratic Constitution turns out to be undemocratic. This has been proved in Hitler's Germany. In India, the Constitutional amendments are really heading in the very same direction. The Constitutional amendments have become so usual that, most of the people do not any more consider the Constitution to be important. . . . It is because of the policy to suppress the people in the name of Constitution that people have considerably lost respect for the Constitution itself. By openly challenging the Constitution, Jayaprakash has really started the non-violent mass movement. The victory of such a movement is inevitable. It is because, this movement is based on the accumulated grievances of the people. The armed police can hardly suppress this movement as it is

non-violent. Let them imprison, and shoot... By exploiting more and more, the exploiter gets exhausted. This is the rule of non-violence. To think that Jayaprakash introduced the movement in Bihar is misleading. The students of Bihar are really the backbone of this movement. The movement is carried on behalf of the Students Action Committee. That non-violence is a dynamic force is once again being proved.

It can be very well imagined that under such circumstances, a social revolution is imminent. There is a silent preparation for such a revolution."

Commenting on the two major aspects of Jayaprakash's political thinking such as his encouragement to the students and youth to get integrated into a movement and his views on non-partisan politics, Mahtab wrote,

"Since the tradition of vote has been introduced in this country only in the last couple of years, politics has become the synonym for election. Further, election implies party politics. Countries where the tradition of election has been introduced for a very long time, party politics are not that acute as it is in our country."

Similarly, commenting on the nature of students' participation in politics, Mahtab maintained,

". . . Students and educated youth should be roundly associated with the policies of the States. In fact, the colleges and universities are the best available platforms to discuss state policies from an ethical standpoint and are also the nerve centres for organising public opinion on state policies. Even if somebody gets a first class in the examination s/he is deprived of elementary knowledge regarding state policy. Hence as an officer, he is not competent to implement the state policies. Moreover, those who are taking to politics should also equally possess adequate knowledge regarding state policy. Otherwise, they prove themselves to be mere campaigners of a particular party. Once upon a time, Gandhi used to inspire the students regarding the contemporary

politics. Even after independence, many of the political parties also sought to inspire the students as regards state policies. It was at this point of time that various organisations based on the ideological principles of communism, socialism and democracy got structured. But gradually being cut off from the State policies, the students came to consider themselves as a special class in the society. They sought to defend their cause with the support of political parties. And in turn, they reciprocated by supporting those political parties. The political parties equally utilised the students in the political campaign of the party. Thus an atmosphere of opportunism came to prevail in the general student communities. The students were thus cut off from the society at large. Instead of becoming the spokespersons of the general masses, they claimed that they deserved to be given more facilities than the general masses. Thus, the overall behaviour on the part of the students in terms of sympathising with the ordinary people, respecting the common man, and conducting oneself by looking into the problems of others was found to be missing."

Writing about the implications of Jayaprakash Movement, Mahtab wrote on 9 Dec. 1974,

"One never knows how many new political patterns will surface because of the 'flood' which has been created throughout this country due to Jayaprakash's movement. Due to this flood no political party can maintain its *status quo*; not even those who devoted themselves to constructive activities as per Gandhian ideology keeping themselves away from party-politics. This is precisely because in the Gandhian scheme of politics, constructive activities was very much a part and parcel of the nation's politics. . . In fact during Dec. 1947, Gandhi suggested in the conference of constructive activists that they should not be attracted towards administration but they should be associated with the politics of the nation. They should vote fearlessly and vote judiciously."

Following the arrest of Mahtab during the period of 'Emergency', his editorial column *Gaan Majlis* went out of print.

However, it was resumed once again from 5 Nov. 1976 following the release of Mahtab. In 8 January, 1977, Mahtab urged the Government to release the imprisoned students and youth. In this context, he observed:

"Since the Vigilance Department in Orissa is now placed under the control of the police department; it is no more an active organisation. The new Ministry should write to the C.B.I. to investigate into the internal activities of the Health Department. Then only one can know, how far the administration has been damaged.

In order to seize black money, the houses of rich people as well as big businessmen are raided. But, black money can be found in the possession of Ministers to the petty officials of forest department. It seems that neither the Income Tax Department nor any other department tries to target them. If the activities of each departments like Health are investigated then only the administration can be revamped".

Commenting on the emerging relations between the Communists and the Congress, Mahtab observed on 12 January 1977:

"Now that the conflict between these two parties has surfaced, the bureaucrats are really caught on the horns of a dilemma. In order to remove the dilemma from the minds of the officials, a clear-cut instruction should be issued on behalf of the Government. Moreover, the committees need to be reorganised.

Yet in another piece titled *The Profit and Loss of Emergency*, Mahtab pointed out :

"The Government is openly advertising from top to bottom the benefits which the country derived due to the imposition of Emergency. . . . The sense of discipline in the country has increased. The tendency to resort to strikes and movement without any reason and thereby incurring loss in the productivity sphere has gone down. The administration has also been disciplined. The

programme to contain inflation in fact, had really begun in the pre-Emergency days. Similarly, the practice of bringing in foreign goods which were legally not permitted for import and then to do trade on these commodities had also really started before Emergency. Still then, these are often shown to be the distinct benefits of Emergency. Let it be done, but if we look into the weaknesses of Emergency, we can know that they outnumber the advantages. In fact, it is like setting a house on fire to kill the mosquitoes which implies more loss than any distinct advantage. The Prime Minister has herself admitted that mistakes have been committed during Emergency and those mistakes are being rectified. This is a matter of relief. But the Government of India should conduct a thorough investigation into the excesses of Emergency to know the defects of Emergency and the remedial measures undertaken to overcome it should be very clearly evident to the people at large. . . .

Besides, follow up actions are equally essential. If this is not done, then from the historical standpoint, it will be reported that more loss have been incurred because of Emergency".

Reflecting on Indira's Emergency Rule, Mahtab wrote on 24 March, 1977 under the caption *The End of a nightmare*, "It is beyond doubt that Mrs. Gandhi's resignation after ten long years of absolute and authoritarian rule can be treated as the end of a long nightmare. Being indulged in a nightmare, Mrs. Gandhi lost self-control and along with that the people of the country had to suffer from the ill effects of that nightmare. The nightmare for Mrs. Gandhi was that she was bound to be the ruler or else, the country would disintegrate. In order to keep herself in power, she imposed all the oppressive policies inherent in a centralised rule. In such a rule people were terrorised and if one was arrested, thousands simply panicked. The Press suffered from huge restrictions. . . depending on the reports of the intelligence agencies elections were ordered. . . . As a result of which, the Congress which had brought independence to this country and ruled for 30 years

subsequently was rejected by the people at large. This is a sensational historical event. As Aurangzeb became instrumental in the downfall of Mughal Rule, so also Mrs. Gandhi was responsible for the downfall of Congress.

I wrote a letter to Mrs. Gandhi on 30 June, 1975, after being arrested and put into Bhanjanagar Jail. The last sentence of the letter was 'after being released from Jail in 1945 June, after, 4 years of imprisonment, I had thought that I would never see jail again. I was released from British Jail then. Just after 30 years, I am imprisoned in the Congress Jail. What a turn of events of fate!'

One feels baffled to recall the developments of last 19 - 20 months. How such a great nation became lifeless and silent? However, it is a liberated life now, an open society where one can discuss each and every issue quite openly without any hindrance. . .

I had declared in 1975 April, that I would not take part in party politics any more. I am still holding on to this decision. Whatever I could do, I did by defying Emergency in order to remove fear from the minds of the people. Then came the elections, there was no question of my participation in the very elections. . . "

Analysing the inherent strength of Indian democracy, Mahtab observed under the editorial caption *Indian Democracy*:

"There are many intellectuals in the western countries and particularly in America in the shape of lecturers, journalists and researchers, who sometime travel in any country and talk to some people there and then start writing long articles and books on the people of that country. The viewpoint as advanced by this category of intellectuals is that India is moving towards an era of feudalism. They hold that democracy is imposed on the Indians by the British, yet they are far away from the very tradition of democracy.

This time India has emerged as an ideal amongst countries of Asia and Africa. It is hoped that Pakistan, Srilanka and Burma

will definitely learn something from Indian experiment. It is the maiden example of an absolute Prime Minister of centralised rule losing the election. I don't remember if this has happened elsewhere. This can equally be taken as an alarming sign for the future rulers. . .

Both Congress Party and Mrs. Gandhi have accepted the people's verdict and have expressed their wishes to the people. This is another proof of the fact that Indian democracy is stable and strong. There is no scope for bitterness on either side. Everybody has accepted the popular verdict with utmost regards. What more do we expect from democracy than this? Both the victor and victim have strengthened democracy. Both the parties are to be thanked."

Mahtab considered the Emergency rule of Mrs. Gandhi as one of the blackest phases of Indian democratic rule. He in fact, viewed that the end of such 'misrule' by Mrs. Gandhi implied the beginning of a new era in the country. In this connection, he maintained in one of his columns titled : *To resume writing in a clean state* :

"After being defeated in the last election, Congress which was in power for the last 30 years seems to have learnt a lesson. . . . Mrs. Gandhi issued a letter though a delayed one, owning the entire responsibility for the disaster of Congress. She was thinking that everybody would be satisfied by this act but this did not happen.

Innumerable people respect the very tradition of Congress. Now that the Congress is back on democratic rails, these people will be assured. The in-charge President of Congress, Swaran Singh has given firm assurance that Congress would not return to the days of Emergency. Other leaders have also spoken equally with firm conviction. In the larger interest of the nation as well as from the standpoint of stability of democratic tradition of India, let Congress exist in India as a very strong political party. This will be hoped by one and all.

The competitor of Congress, the Janata Party must also

learn from the crisis of Congress and thus remain alert. If internal democracy is not retained in a party, the party turns out to be one being dominated by individuals. In such a context, the party not only destroys itself but also immensely harms the interests of the country. The Janata Party is being organised fullfledgedly. Enough proofs are already there to think that this party is not going to be controlled by individuals. If Congress and Janata become equally two powerful parties in India, then Indian democracy will be strong and stable".

MAHTAB AND THE *PRAJATANTRA*

Mahtab had a firm belief that Oriya literature and culture ought to be developed in order to highlight the genuine Oriyan identity in the world. He dreamt of the development of the Oriyas as a race at a stage when he found that Orissa and Oriyas were languishing in a state of acute passivity due to lack of political independence for a long time coupled with the step-motherly attitude of a foreign rule. As he put it, " I used to spend long hours in the jail thinking about various plans and programmes. Now, these ideas are to be translated into reality. It is not for me but for those ambitious and enthusiastically excited generations of youth. . . My imagination is to initiate a new era for Orissa in every sphere of activities. The idea is to rekindle hopes and aspiration. Let Orissa be at par with other developed states. Let everybody feel proud about Orissa. If you are determined and follow certain high ideals, you can overcome all odds because of God's blessing. This was announced by Swami Vivekananda. This was also taught to us by Mahatma Gandhi way back in 1921".

In fact, this kind of idea which he harboured in the jail ultimately climaxed in the shape of his daily the *Prajatantra* alongwith the founding of the institution *Prajatantra Prachara Samiti* in 1947. Of course, the *Prajatantra* had been conceived and published as a newspaper right from 1923. It was first published in the Mukur Press of Cuttack under the editorship

of Mahtab. In 1924, it came to be published from the Town Press of Balasore.

During this phase the *Prajatantra* played a vital role in mobilising people and shaping public opinion in the context of *Salt Satyagraha* of 1930s and the popular movements in the Nilgiri State against the exploitation of the *Raja*. However, due to the ban put on the publication of the *Prajatantra* in 1932 by the colonial authorities in addition to the precarious financial position of this newspaper, it ultimately went out of publication in 1933. But this crisis could hardly deter Mahtab in terms of giving up the idea of making the *Prajatantra*, a daily. In fact, it was at this juncture, Mahtab resolved to make the *Prajatantra*, a full-fledged daily, without letting it die as such. It was this resolve as well as sheer will-power of Mahtab which saw the *Prajatantra* back into publication in 1947.

It is worth mentioning here that apart from being a front-ranking politician, Mahtab clearly stood out as a poet, essayist, historian, journalist, social reformer and finally an organiser. In fact, even before Mahtab took to national politics he had proved his competence as a litterateur and a journalist. Around 1917-18, he was involved in the publication of a hand-written Oriya monthly digest *Malaya* and a weekly English Magazine *Dustbin* which were published from the mess where Mahtab used to stay in Cuttack. Moreover, he used to write in *Utkal Dipika* focussing on several contemporary issues relating to Orissan Society. He also kept discussing with his friends, the themes which were published in the weekly English Journal i.e. the *Oriya* edited by Madhusudhan Das. By 1937, he was almost writing two columns regularly every week for the *Amrit Bazar Patrika* and had become a representative for Associated Press on behalf of Orissa. For Mahtab, both politics and journalism had assumed crucial significance. Moreover, he also believed that journalism had intense linkage with literature for his journalistic engagement enabled him to evince his ideas by utilising the pen. As he put it, "the kind of

interest I have for politics equally matches my interest for literature. I have in fact, developed such a habit that I can't see the distinction between these two streams."

One can clearly discern the trends of journalism, literature and politics merging as a whole into the overall personality of Mahtab. Mahtab knew pretty well that the development of any nation specifically depended on the growth of its literature and culture and the lack of such a development inevitably led to the underdevelopment of society and culture.

The years following independence presented a sordid picture as far as the press and publishing world of Orissa were concerned. There were one or two dailies, a few periodicals alongwith a handful of writers who often lacked commitment. It was in such a depressing context, Mahtab dreamt of building a modern Orissan Society by taking determined step to publish the *Prajatantra* as a daily. The *Prajatantra*, as Mahtab visualised, would be an instrument for fighting out the pervasive stagnation which had characterised the contemporary Oriya society. More importantly, it was sought to be projected as a forum to be utilised by the young upcoming Oriya generations. Realising these difficulties, Mahtab himself observed:

" When the Oriya youth will look up to the world after getting into the struggle for existence, he will move forward on the basis of his competence and worth. But he will be definitely upset to see the prevailing condition of the society. I feel worried about the Oriya youth who might really be upset in future. Even though we can't do anything, our future generation ought not suffer, rather they should move forward. I expressed this concern during my maiden budget speech of 1946.

High hopes, noble deeds and a self-confidence to be at par with the neighbours - such ideals must inspire the youth of Orissa. In order to accomplish the idea through literature and allied cultural activities, I had conceived and implemented the idea of the *Prajatantra Prachar Samity*. I have invested all my mind and

money wholeheartedly in this project. I do not have my personal interest in it. . . "

In fact, after independence the *Prajatantra* came to symbolise the pride of Oriyan identity. Explaining the objective of the *Prajatantra*, Mahtab himself wrote in an editorial in 1950:

" In order to give Orissa its due and put it in its just position in the Independent India as well as to build a healthy national life are the twin aims of the *Prajatantra*. In fact, the *Prajatantra* has waged an all out war against the stagnation and the void which had gripped the Oriyan social life for ages".

Emphasising the importance of literature and culture in the overall growth of the 'Nation' and 'Society' he had pointed out in his speech during the annual literary conference organised on behalf of the *Prajatantra Prachara Samiti* in 1955: " I believe that the collective development of Orissa is only possible if Oriya literature can create the required strength among the Oriyas to question the world at large". Yet again in 1971, he warned the litterateurs : "The exclusive prerogative of literature is to form public opinion as well as to mobilise popular feeling. In almost all the revolutions which have so far been staged in the world, literature has played the leading role in all of them. Hence, those who are writing must remember that they are not writing for self-satisfaction but they are essentially writers to create waves ".

Since the *Prajatantra* was based on this above ideal, Mahtab dedicated this newspaper to the masses. However, following the publication of the *Prajatantra* in 1949, Mahtab launched the monthly Oriya Journal *Jhankar* in order to popularise the Oriya literature. It can hardly be denied that both the *Prajatantra* and the *Jhankar* came to play a meaningfully dominant role in the development of Oriya literature and culture.

Moreover, in order to encourage youngsters, children, and women, the *Prajatantra* brought out regular supplements in the shape of *Meena Bazar* (for children), *Nari Mahal* (for women),

and *Juba Jagat* (for the youths) around 1955. Similarly, in order to focus on Oriya plays and films, a section like *Chhaya Mancha*, to highlight on agriculture a forum entitled *Krushi Bibhaga*, for Science, *Gyan Vigyan*, for literature, a section in the shape of Sunday literary supplement ; and finally for the common man his down - to - earth editorial through the regular columns of *Gaan Majlis* came to be incorporated in the body text of the *Prajatantra* daily. All these efforts ultimately led to the congregations of budding litterateurs of Orissa under the banner of the *Prajatantra*. Rightly enough one of the eminent litterateurs of Orissa, Janaki Ballava Patnaik by way of reflecting over his association with the *Prajatantra* has pointed out:

" Of course, the *Prajatantra* was not a mere press nor it was conceived in this manner. Rather, it had become the nerve centre for many educated Oriyas. Eventhough, the administrative activities were carried on in the Orissa Secretariat, yet many of the decisions pertaining to such administration were discussed and taken in the premises of the *Prajatantra* under the overall guidance and leadership of Mahtab. Despite his immense preoccupation, Mahtab never forgot to come to the *Prajatantra* office nor did he ignore to discuss the issues relating to Orissa State and Society in the *Prajatantra* Office. In fact, the *Prajatantra* was like the path finder of the contemporary Orissa."

To put it otherwise, the *Prajatantra* became a platform for varied discourse on politics and literature under Mahtab's leadership. The decision of the *Prajatantra* forum sought to be utilised as a guide for the collective development of the state of Orissa.

Mahtab regularly wrote for the *Prajatantra*. In 1948, he wrote more than hundreds of features under the pen-name of Farsichanda. This column was titled *Parihass* or *Pralap*. But among all the writings of Mahtab, the most popular column he penned was *Gaan Majlis*. He continued with this column right since 1950 till 1986, excepting the phase of the *Emergency*

when Mahtab was arrested for his biting critique on Mrs. Gandhi's style of politics. *Gaan Majlis* as a regular editorial piece focused on the problems which the common man in the society faced. Perhaps after Fakir Mohan Senapati and Gopal Chandra Praharaj, Mahtab could alone continue with the trend of political satire of Oriya literature.

Mahtab had perfectly realised that the conceptual as well as mental divide which existed between the youth and the old could only be bridged up if everybody started dreaming about their youth forgetting the very divide.

The progress of society and nation could only be possible, he asserted, by dreaming about youth. He used to invite the litterateurs every Saturday evening for a literary get-together. This gathering of litterateurs ultimately took the shape of a weekly literary supplement of the *Prajatantra*. This get-together also inspired some of the budding youngsters of Ravenshaw college, the premier educational institution of the state to form a literary association entitled as *Young Writers Association of Orissa*.

Mahtab had felt the pulse of Oriya Society in toto. He knew that Orissan society by and large was conservative. Particularly, women were a suppressed lot who were yet to be liberated. The middle class had a very poor impression about the tradition of stage plays, theatre or films. Realising that such attitudes were not helpful in the growth of a modern society, he took ample care to bring about the desired reforms in all spheres. Thus in order to liberate the womanhood, he floated an exclusive supplement concerning women in the *Prajatantra* under the editorship of Hemalata Mansingh. He not only brought out a section in the *Prajatantra* to cater to the literary needs of the children in the shape of *Meena Bazar*, but equally used to organise an exhibition for the children called the *Meena Mela*.

The *Prajatantra* did a lot to encourage various aspects of traditional Oriyan culture such as fine art and *Jatra*. Through the patronage of the *Prajatantra*, such cultural traditions of Orissa

were not only highlighted but many of the extraordinarily talented Oriya artists could be brought into the national scene.

When the middle class Oriyas were scornful in their attitude towards the tradition of *Jatras* (plays staged in the open air *pandals* of the villages), the *Prajatantra* intervened to justify the uniqueness of this tradition by founding a Drama Association under the auspices of the *Prajatantra Prachar Samiti*. Mahtab as the Chief Minister himself often participated as an actor in several one-act plays which were even scripted by him. Perhaps, this gesture on his part was suggestive of the fact that in a democracy, the relation between the ruler and the ruled was really intense. It was because of his inspiration that the Kalinga Studio was established in Orissa to enable the Oriya film industrialists to produce films in Orissa.

Mahtab for a long time remained the President of the Oriya Olympic Association and the *Kala Vikas Kendra* - a cultural outfit for the promotion of Oriya culture. It was for his initiative and inspiration again that the Barabati Stadium was also established in Cuttack.

Mahtab very significantly conceived the idea of *Vishuva Milan* to celebrate the Oriya New Year's Day on the 1st April every year. On this day, under the initiatives of *Prajatantra Prachara Samiti* and *Jhankar*, a magnificent function is organised in Cuttack wherein the litterateurs of the state congregate to celebrate the Oriya New Year's Day through intense literary - cultural activities. This function offers an opportunity for both the old and the new litterateurs of the State to meet and interact. Moreover, persons having attained excellence in the literary sphere from different parts of India are invited as Chief Guests to grace *Vishuva Milan* every year. The idea behind this is to help acquaint the Oriya literary trend with that of the mainstream Indian literature.

To organise a function like *Visuva Milan* as large scale literary and cultural function on the very new year's day of Orissa itself reveals Mahtab's sensitive response to the cultural

tradition, identity, spiritualism and the overall pride and assertion about oriyan cultural values.

In fact, in his memorable speech of 1954 during the *Visuva Milan* function, Mahtab had emphatically pointed out :

Jhankar represents the sheer height of the temple relating to the cultural organisations which we have built. As the top of the temple depends on the base of the temple similarly the sustainability of the temple depends on the survival of the top of the temple. Hence all these activities are related to each other in an unseen manner ".

In fact *Visuva Milan* can be seen as one of the large-scale and significant cultural-cum-literary extravaganza involving so many litterateurs of India. One of the greatest qualities of Mahtab was that he was a person with enough of liberal values. He never flaunted his ego nor did he discriminate between rich and poor, educated and uneducated or high and low class, thanks to his Gandhian ideological orientation. Instead he believed in meeting and interacting with people of different walks of life. The *Prajatantra* office and his residence were always overcrowded with visitors. More importantly, each and every visitor came back from Mahtab with at least some advice, guidance and nobody ever complained of not being able to meet Mahtab. He was very regular in personally responding to each and every letter he received from anybody in the world. He never missed the opportunity to write a letter or convincingly express his point of view.

All these traits of Mahtab enabled him profusely to learn the best from the other individuals. In the process, he also sought to utilise the inherent strength, capability of the others with whom he met, talked, interacted for the cause of nation-building. He used to donate money or stipends to the needy children for their education. He tried his best to help others in whatever way possible, if anybody sought his help. The other notable trait in his personality was that he was quite punctual. He used to report in the *Prajatantra* office sharp at 3 p.m. every day commuting all the way from

Bhubaneswar in his red car. Hence the people in Cuttack could know that it was 3 p.m. if they saw Mahtab's red car. Similarly, he used to spend the early morning hours for writing his editorial.

Mahtab was really instrumental in making the Orissa Government proclaim the ban on animal slaughter which were performed in different temples of Orissa. This reveals his aggressive character against a conservative and tradition-bound Oriya Society. More so, this also points to his inclination for spirituality.

In fact, Mahtab retired from active politics after 1977 when Janata Government came to power with 1977 General Elections. But leaders and people cutting across party lines never dared to ignore Mahtab even after the latter opted for political *sanyas*. They respected and feared him as one of the top elders in the family of politicians and sought his blessings. Viewed from any angle either politically or ideologically, the contemporary politicians had to think twice before countering the 'Mahtab line of thinking'. Every morning, people in the streets would be definitely waiting for what Mahtab was saying or how Mahtab was posing any or every issue in his editorial *Gaan Majlis*.

Mahtab kept writing regularly his column *Gaan Majlis* till Dec, 1986. And finally he retired from active politics on 2nd Jan, 1987.

LAST DAYS OF MAHTAB

"End of History : Mahtab is no more", lamented the front page of the *Prajatantra* in its 3rd January edition, 1987. It went on to note : History really ends here. *Utkal Keshari, Bhisma Pitamaha*, the most popular builder of Modern Orissa, Dr. Harekrushna Mahtab is no more. One feels choked while writing this. Everything seems to be in standstill, there is a void everywhere. Pen even doesn't move. Everything appears to be lifeless. There is no end to tears. All the epithets seem to have been exhausted with the departure of the great soul. He was the great hope and assurance for one and all. . . He was a true Gandhian, freedom fighter, statesman, diplomat, historian, literary personality, poet, dramatist, musician and an actor all at one and gained tremendous dexterity in all forms of art.

"Everything appears to have ended at the particular moment on 2nd January, 1987 at 11.10 P.M. The historic capital of Orissa, Bhubaneswar which he himself built saw him breathing his last in its lap. The waters of Hirakud Dam lost its diamond. The Hero of Orissa is gone.

"He not only launched the *Prajatantra*, he was also the founder of *Hirakhand* (the vernacular daily in Western Orissa). He was practically the *jhankar* (rhythm) of Jhankar Literary Journal, the uncle Mahtab of *Meena Bazar*. The *Gaan Majlis* ends here. The red Mercedes Benz car might reach the compound of the *Prajatantra* Press at 4 P. M., but we will no more see

Mahtab alighting from the car with a walking-stick and climbing the stairs to sit down in his usual seat. The moment Mahtab arrived in the *Prajatantra* office, people used to mob him. He would speak, people would listen. He was deriving pleasure in both listening to people and talking to them. He was truly a mass leader and a great inspiration for the popular mentality."

It is apparent that no Oriya would have felt an iota of doubt and intellectual uneasiness while reading the obituary of the *Prajatantra* on the very day of 3rd January, 1987. Truly, Mahtab's death marked the end of a glorious chapter of History. Till the last breath of his life following a brief illness, he kept thinking about Orissa in particular and India at a broader level. He penned his last piece of *Gaan Majlis*, his favourite edit column on 13 Dec. 1986. This piece reflects his passionate concern for the welfare of the masses. Advocating strongly for the policy of *Swadeshi* of Gandhian variety, he wrote, "If the Government Policy is not based on *Swadeshi*, which implies that the economic transactions of the nation was to be made self-reliant by relying on the country's own productions then the lot of the peasantry can not be improved. This policy is neatly followed in China which has substantially helped to improve the condition of the Chinese peasantry. This is not the case with India. But who is going to decide about this policy?"

In the same vein, reflecting on Orissa's maladministration he continued, "The administration in Orissa is so much demoralised today that nobody knows to whom to speak for a decision as regards any problem.

"It is surprising that the Central leadership is hardly sensitive about the administration of a state. This is a problem which is more crucial than other economic problem. . . Despite political crisis, if the bureaucracy would have possessed a minimal sense of patriotism and a sense of empathy for the masses, then this problem would not have cropped up."

Mahtab's old age even failed to erase his incredible faith in the philosophy of action. In his last letter which he wrote on 31

Nov. 1986 to Anil Ghosh, one of the Socialist leaders of Orissa, he exhorted, " If one wants to live, he has to work. If one works having faith in God, then his life becomes meaningful. Even if you want to opt for a spiritual life, you have to do your duty. "

Paying tributes to Mahtab, the-then Chief Minister of Orissa, Janaki Ballav Patnaik commented, "even though Mahtab had launched the Oriya daily *Prajatantra* with a distinct political perspective, the tradition of freedom which Mahtab had encouraged in the field of journalism is really worth-remembering . . . Like Nehru who wrote *Discovery of India* during his years of imprisonment, Mahtab also authored *History of Orissa* based on documentary evidence when the latter was in jail. . . As long as he was in power either in Orissa, Delhi or as the Governor of Bombay or he was out of power - he had fully committed himself to serve the cause of the people. As a great leader, he was just not confined to Orissa but rather instrumental in deciding certain national policies of India. His life was full of activities, he didn't have leisure nor he knew recreation. His life was fully dedicated to serve the cause of the people and the nation. For him we are honoured as Oriyas. . . "

Recalling his close association with Mahtab during 1950s and 1960s he further observed, " when I left the *Prajatantra* in 1967 to join politics, I had mentally decided that I would not speak or write anything against Mahtab which I have tried to observe to the best possible extent in my political career".

Lamenting the death of Mahtab, Sachi Routray, the prominent leftist and well-known poet of Orissa who also received the Jnanapith award, described Mahtab as a "dazzling personality which is quite rare in contemporary Orissa". In his obituary he pointed out thus :

"Mahtab was not a conservative politician but rather a pragmatic one who unlike many other Congress leaders never held on to Congress for ever. He never hesitated to form an alternative organisation when the need arose. Jana Congress was a clear

example of his politics of pragmatism". Being a poet himself, Routray dubbed Mahtab's literary creation as "attractive and objective" and hailed *Gaan Majlis* and other prose writings as "clear, strong, and neat and bearing a distinct signature of economy of expressed words." Focusing on his political life, he observed, "his revolutionary mentality enabled him to withstand the prolonged imprisonment during the notorious years of Emergency."

The other political heavyweight of Orissa, Biju Patnaik described Mahtab as "the builder of Modern Orissa, in whose death the country as well as the State lost a Veteran Leader".

Giani Zail Singh the then President of India in his condolence message wrote "Mahtab's death signified the end of an era". Similarly Rajiv Gandhi, the Prime Minister of India said in his message, "the nation will remember Mahtab for his fearless courage and immense sacrifice for the people". The then Vice-President of India, R. Venkataraman pointed out that "Mahtab was one of those rare fearless revolutionaries of freedom struggle era".

In his condolence message, the editor of the *Samaja*, the other popular daily of Orissa and the President of *Lok Sevak Mandal* noted "in this hour of crisis of the nation and Orissa State, the death of Mahtab has caused an irreparable void, which can be hardly filled up by anyone else... Let his revolutionary mentality inspire the youth for ever."

Jaswant Singh, the General Secretary of Janata Party then, observed "the role of Mahtab was crucial in the building of modern Orissa and India". While Prafulla Mohanta, the-then Chief minister of Assam nostalgically recalled Mahtab's love and affection for the people of Assam; the Governor of Haryana S. M. H. Burney described Mahtab as "a noted freedom fighter, a great patriot and an extraordinary statesman". Similarly the well-known Congress leader Arjun Singh, lamented the death of Mahtab commenting, "the nation lost one of its most prominent freedom fighters, journalists and an extraordinary administrator. Likewise, yet another Congress leader, K. C. Pant, said, "the nation lost one of its renowned freedom

fighters and a brilliant administrator whose name will be recorded in history in golden letters".

The Home Minister of the Central Cabinet, Buta Singh who came down to Orissa to attend the funeral ceremony remarked that "with the death of Mahtab another veteran freedom fighter was removed from the national life". He further described Mahtab as a great writer whose *History of Orissa* was ever-memorable". In fact, it was quite aptly said when the labour leader of Orissa, Ram Chandra Khuntia opined that, " with the death of Mahtab the country again lost a front ranking freedom fighter like Gandhi, Nehru and Subhash Bose".

It is really worth-mentioning that for the intelligentsia in Orissa, the absence of *Gaan Majlis* from the the *Prajatantra* with the death of Mahtab was a shocking reality. In this context, Mr. Justice Harihara Mohapatra observed, "Mahtab had initiated the edit column *Gaan Majlis* to draw popular attention and Governmental considerations to the problem and grievances of the common people and this column continued for long years. And with Mahtab's death, this column is removed for ever."

However, for the people in the streets as well as in the grassroots in all parts of Orissa, Mahtab's death was mourned in a very poignant and cryptic statement - "Babuji (as he was fondly called by people at large) is gone !"

For this, justifiably enough, the leftist poet of Orissa, Rabi Singh who had developed certain differences with Mahtab at certain points of time candidly confessed, "Mahtab was like himself, not like anybody else - the bearer of a distinct value in public life."

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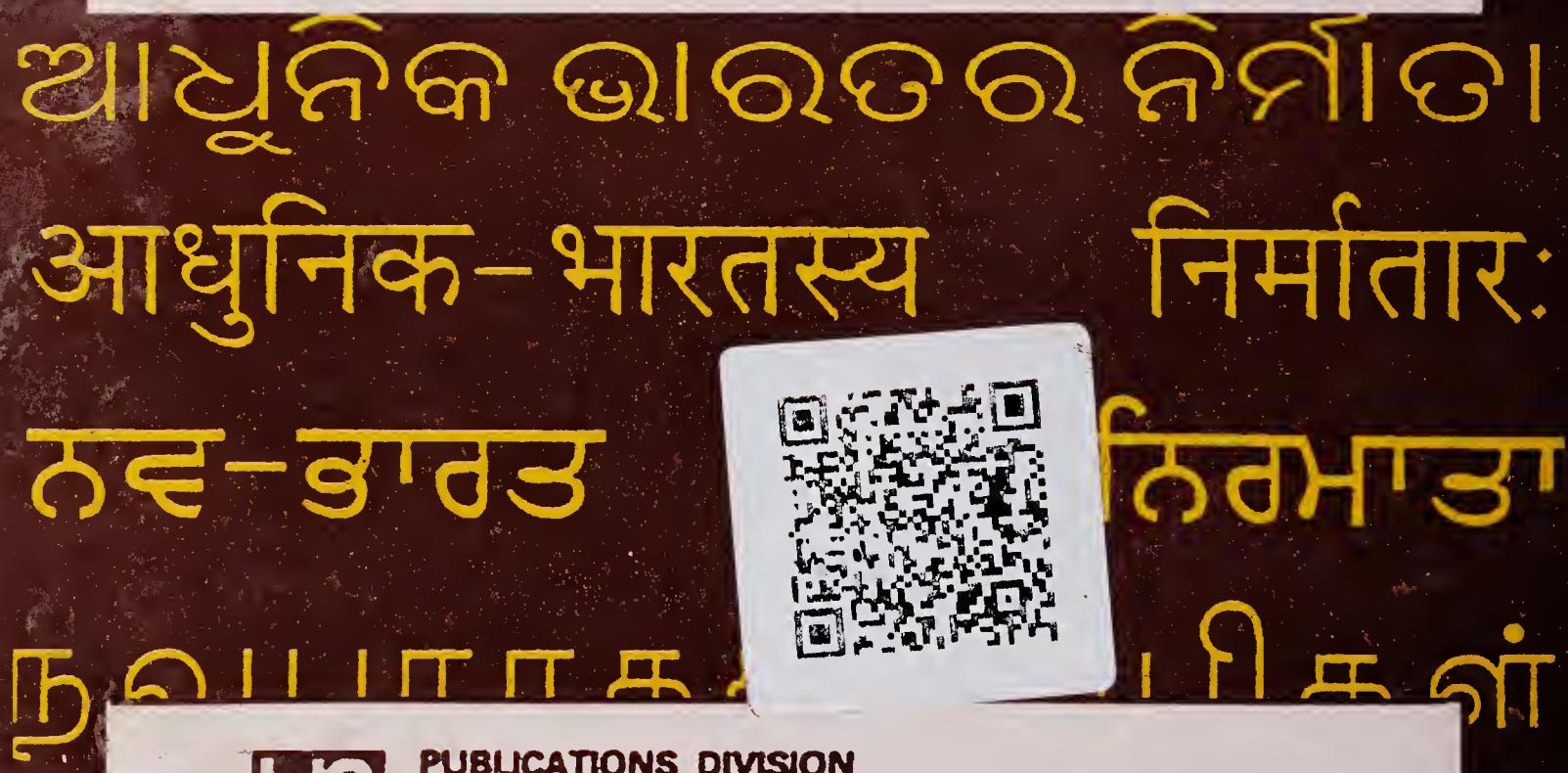
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